

CHRISTMAS AT
Blackthorn Manor



LUCY MARIN

Christmas at Blackthorn Manor

Lucy Marin



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Edited by Debra Anne Watson and Jan Ashton

On the cover: *Swan House at Christmas* Photograph by [Jeff Milsteen Photography](#)

ISBN 978-1-956613-89-6

To my family, with whom I have enjoyed so many memorable Christmas celebrations.

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Chapter One

Mr Darcy! Elizabeth could not believe what her eyes were showing her. Never would she have imagined seeing him, of all men, walk through the door. Her eyes were fixed on his tall, handsome form. Her heart raced and her legs felt so weak that she did not know how she would be able to perform the customary curtsy. He regarded her, unmoving, his lips parted.

It had been above sixteen months since their last meeting that awful morning in Lambton when she had told him about Lydia's elopement.

The sound of a voice crying, "Miss Bennet! How wonderful to see you again," caused Elizabeth to swing her eyes to the left.

Oh my goodness, she thought. *Mr Bingley*. Looking back at Mr Darcy, she noticed the lady standing by his side. Elizabeth had no right to the relief she felt when she realised it was Miss Georgiana Darcy. Mr Darcy had turned to watch his friend and did not seem pleased. *He looks almost as he did when we first met.*

There was a laugh followed by her brother-in-law, Thomas, saying, "Mrs Ridley now. Jane, my dear, you know Mr Bingley?"

Elizabeth let her eyes drop to the carpet and held her breath for

a moment to calm herself before having to participate in what would be unnecessary introductions but necessary explanations. *How can I bear to talk to him, let alone spend two weeks in his company?* Remembering Mr Bingley, she felt an added measure of dread.

“Mrs Ridley? I-I did not know...” Mr Bingley’s brow furrowed almost as if it was inconceivable that Jane would be married.

What did he think would happen? Did he truly believe she would remain single for the rest of her life? They have not seen each other in above two years.

Their host, Mr Edward Ledbury, said, “They were married a few months ago. I was very glad when they agreed to spend the Festive Season at Blackthorn. It has given us a chance to know our new cousin and her sister, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You have met?”

It was two days before Christmas. Elizabeth had been at Blackthorn Manor for a fortnight and had known from the outset that their party would grow larger. *Why did I not ask the names of their guests?* A shiver coursed through her. *At least then I would have been prepared—or I might have found an excuse to leave.*

Her thoughts slipped to the last time she had seen Mr Darcy. He had entered the parlour at the inn just as she finished reading Jane’s letters which had carried the shocking news about Lydia. Distressed, Elizabeth had told him everything. He had left before the Gardiners returned, and she and her aunt and uncle had departed Lambton within two hours.

On their arrival at Longbourn, they had discovered that Mr Bennet was still in London, seeking Lydia and Mr Wickham. Mr Gardiner had promised to send him home, and he was as good as his word. Just as Elizabeth was abandoning the last shred of hope that the couple—and a way to save at least part of the family’s reputation—would be found, an express had arrived for her father. When he showed it to her, she had been stunned into silence for a full five minutes. It was from Mr Wickham, asking for Mr Bennet’s permission to marry Lydia.

Our original intention was to go to Scotland. However, I was obliged to remain in town longer than anticipated, and your daughter now professes a desire to do the deed here. With your written consent, I shall obtain a licence, and we shall be wed as soon as it can be arranged. Miss Lydia stays with an older lady

of my acquaintance, Mrs Younge, who keeps a respectable establishment.

Elizabeth had recognised the name from Mr Darcy's letter explaining his connexion to Mr Wickham. She very much doubted the situation was 'respectable' but would not burden her father with that news.

I suspect you have heard a great deal about debts &c., but I assure you it is all exaggerated. What little money I owed here and there, I have paid off, and I have purchased a commission in the regulars, in Colonel Clarke's regiment, which is quartered in Newcastle.

Mr Wickham had asked for nothing from her father other than Lydia's share of Mrs Bennet's five thousand pounds, which her daughters stood to inherit on her death. Elizabeth could not believe he would take Lydia for so little and was convinced there was more to the story than he had disclosed.

As for his apparently-full purse, she assumed he had obtained the money through nefarious means, perhaps a stroke of good luck at the gaming tables.

Elizabeth forced her attention to the present when Mr Bingley greeted her.

"How do you do, Mr Bingley?"

"Excellent!" Looking over his shoulder, he continued, "Darcy, can you believe it? Here we find Miss Ben—er, Mrs Ridley and Miss Elizabeth."

James Ledbury, their host's younger brother, said, "It is a happy coincidence. We shall be a merry party without any of that awkwardness that comes from some of us not knowing the others."

Elizabeth almost laughed.

Mr and Miss Darcy stepped forward. After saying the proper words to the Ledburys and Ridleys, they faced Elizabeth.

Mr Darcy caught her eyes and bowed while murmuring, "Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth curtseyed. "Mr Darcy. Miss Darcy, how lovely to see you again."

Everything suggested the girl, who must be seventeen or

eighteen by now, remained as painfully shy as she had been when they first met. She looked at her brother, blushed, and kept her gaze averted as she curtsied.

Miss Harriet Ledbury encouraged everyone to sit, and they did. “Would you care for tea?” She looked first at Mr Darcy, then Mr Bingley, before returning her gaze to Mr Darcy. “Please, tell me what I can do for your comfort and that of your sister. Refreshments, or would you prefer to go to your rooms?”

Mr Darcy glanced at Georgiana. Addressing their hostess, he said, “I am afraid the journey has fatigued my sister. Perhaps it would be best if we rested for a while.”

“Of course.” Mr Ledbury jumped to his feet to ring for a servant. “Bingley, what is your preference?”

“Oh, uh,” Mr Bingley looked between Miss Ledbury, Mr Darcy, and if Elizabeth was correct, Jane. “I suppose I should change.”

James Ledbury said, “We would all need to retire to prepare for dinner soon in any case. We eat at half seven.”

The butler entered the room, and Mr Ledbury issued his instructions. Elizabeth watched Mr Darcy’s progress to the door and, a few minutes later, went with Jane and Thomas upstairs.



* * *

Thomas led them into the small, cosy sitting room the Ledburys had set aside for their use. Elizabeth much preferred it to the dark, formal withdrawing room they had just left. Jane and Thomas sat on the sofa, while Elizabeth went to the window that overlooked the courtyard. Half turned away from her companions, she asked if they had known who was to join them that day. All Elizabeth remembered being told was that a few of Mr Ledbury’s friends would arrive closer to Christmas. She searched her memory for any clue she could have missed that it would be Mr Darcy, who, even after their long separation, still occupied her thoughts and heart.

Jane said, “Of course not. I would have told you.”

"I knew," Thomas said. "Did I never mention their names? Of course, I did not know the two of you were acquainted with the Darcys and Mr Bingley, so I suppose I thought they would mean nothing to you. How do you know them?"

"Oh, it was a trifling thing," Jane said, shooting a glance at Elizabeth. "Mr Bingley leased Netherfield, the estate neighbouring Longbourn, two years ago. He was there perhaps two months, and naturally we saw him now and then. Mr Darcy stayed with him. I have never met Miss Darcy before."

Elizabeth sat in the soft armchair across from them. Jane's explanation concealed the depths of her friendship with Mr Bingley, but she understood. What husband wants to hear about his wife's former attachments? A prickle of unease nipped at her when Jane, with an expression that seemed almost wistful, looked away from Thomas.

"I understand Ledbury was at school with Darcy, and I later met Bingley through him. I have met Darcy a number of times over the years, though we are no more than acquaintances. Bingley, I have seen only occasionally." He scratched his jaw. "But now that I think about it, I seem to recall him saying something about an estate he had let and a lady he admired. Do you know who it was?"

Suspicion is not in his nature, Elizabeth thought. *If it was while he was at Netherfield, who else would it be other than Jane? He knows she is by far the most beautiful lady in the neighbourhood.*

Jane said, her voice a little sharp to Elizabeth's ear, "He may have lived at any number of estates since we knew him." She stood and strolled around the room, touching the paisley print on the walls and the decorations that adorned the mantel and tables.

When Thomas looked at Elizabeth, she offered him a quick smile. She liked him, as she had since the first time they had met. He was not as handsome or lively as Mr Bingley, but he was steadier, and she had no doubt that he loved Jane. Thomas was the heir to an estate in Northamptonshire. It was about the size of Longbourn, and, from what Elizabeth had seen, more competently managed. The couple had met through Mr Gardiner about eight months after Lydia's elopement. At the time, Jane said that she liked him, but that she would not allow her feelings to fully blossom until she was certain of his intentions. Left unsaid was that she had not been so cautious with Mr Bingley, and it had left her heartbroken.

Elizabeth had promised to go to Jane and Thomas for the Festive Season. When the invitation from Thomas's cousins had arrived, and, after being assured that she was welcomed, she had agreed to join them at Blackthorn Manor. Being at Longbourn held no appeal to Elizabeth. She had tasted the possibility of a different life when she was in Derbyshire, but had lost it, leaving her restless. It was difficult to be at home and see how little had changed despite their near ruination. Her father appeared relieved that the whole thing had ended well; any lesson he might have learnt from it was lost, except that he would not permit Kitty to go stay with the Wickhams, for which Elizabeth was thankful. Her mother liked to talk about her married daughters and scowled at Elizabeth as she lamented her lack of marital prospects. *If she only knew...*

Feeling a sudden need for solitude, Elizabeth leapt to her feet. "I believe I shall go to my room and read a little before dressing for dinner."



* * *

Darcy moved from the window in his bedchamber to one of the wing chairs near the fireplace. He dropped into it, its firmness feeling like a slap against his body, and ran his hands through his hair.

Elizabeth Bennet, here of all places.

A faint groan escaped his lips, and he slid down in the chair, extending his long legs in front of him and resting his chin on his chest. So much of the last two years had been spent battling his love for her. After his failed proposal in Kent, he had tried to forget her and had been foolish enough to believe he was succeeding—until the beautiful July afternoon he arrived at Pemberley to find her touring the grounds with her aunt and uncle. In an instant, he knew that he loved her as much as he ever had. Four wonderful days followed, and he had been growing more confident by the minute that she not only forgave him for the past, but also that she cared

about him.

Then came the devastating news that Wickham, his old foe, had found a victim in her youngest sister. He cursed himself for not doing something, *anything*, to rob Wickham of the ability to injure people in the way that he had almost destroyed Darcy and Georgiana. His pride, his selfishness had led him to make so many mistakes, ones that had injured Elizabeth; losing her was the price he had paid for it.

Over the following weeks, he had come to accept that Elizabeth Bennet was lost to him forever.

Sixteen months. I must be the last person she wishes to see, yet now she must bear my company for the next two weeks, unless she and the Ridleys depart before Twelfth Night. Jane Bennet married, and to Ledbury's cousin. That is a piece of good news. Thank God it is not Elizabeth.

He sighed, sat up, and poured himself a glass of wine from the decanter on the walnut table beside his chair.

I shall have to find a way to tolerate the intolerable and make this as easy for her as it can be. If only I am strong enough not to seek her attention; I know she does not wish for mine.



* * *

Elizabeth was curled up under a rug on the settee in her bedchamber. She had tried to distract herself with reading, but it had not worked. How could she attend to anything when Mr Darcy was in the house, likely behind one of the doors that lined the corridor outside of her room? Did he ever think about her? Did he regret what they had lost? Feel relief that both he and Mr Bingley were spared the humiliation of being brothers to a man like Wickham?

The few days she had spent in Derbyshire were amongst the happiest of her life. How nervous she had been about visiting Pemberley! But since they had been assured that the Darcys were

not in residence, she had agreed to accompany the Gardiners on a tour.

At the time, it seemed like the best decision I ever made. Seeing him, having the opportunity to know the man he truly is, meeting Miss Darcy — Oh, I cannot imagine a more pleasant interlude!

Mr Darcy had brought his sister to meet Elizabeth and the Gardiners the day after their unexpected encounter. The following day, she and Aunt Gardiner had called on Miss Darcy, while Uncle Gardiner went fishing with the gentlemen. They had remained with Miss Darcy for several hours, during half of which Elizabeth was also able to enjoy Mr Darcy's company. The next days had brought more time together, including a drive in the neighbourhood with both Darcys, a picnic at Pemberley, and dining together. Everything she had seen in him during those precious days had taught her to admire him and acknowledge that he suited her perfectly.

In the time it took to read two short letters from Jane, she had lost the promise of their future. It was the great regret of her life that she had been too proud to recognise his true character—and to see Wickham for the villain he was—before it was too late. If she had, Lydia would not now be married to a scoundrel, and Elizabeth would be wife to the best of men.

I do not know how I will bear having to see him, knowing how much he must hate finding me here and that he cannot want Miss Darcy to be in company with Wickham's sisters-in-law. I shall have to avoid them when I can, without being rude or obvious; the last thing any of us needs is for the Ledburys or Thomas to notice awkwardness between us. In two weeks, Jane, Thomas, and I will be gone. Surely, I can be strong enough for that long.



Chapter Two

Throughout dinner, Elizabeth felt constrained. She sat between James Ledbury and Jane, but Mr Darcy might as well have been on either side and across from her. His presence felt heavy. James Ledbury was his usual jovial self; he joked, encouraged her to eat more, asked if she was well when she said she was not hungry, told her tales of Christmases when he and his siblings were children, and made all manner of amusing comments. She could not deny that he was good company. Nevertheless, she was relieved when Miss Ledbury rose to lead the ladies out of the dining parlour.

In the withdrawing room, she joined Miss Darcy on a sofa. To Elizabeth, she looked apprehensive yet determined. She glanced at Elizabeth before lowering her eyes to her hands, which were clasped in her lap.

“I am happy to see you again, Miss Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

Again, the girl peeked up, her blue eyes meeting Elizabeth’s for just a second. Her voice was little more than a whisper when she said, “And I you.”

Elizabeth smiled, hoping Miss Darcy would see it. “I understand your brother has known Mr Ledbury for years. Have you met the

family before?"

Miss Darcy nodded. "O-only once or twice. They were very kind to include me in their invitation to my brother."

"As they were kind to extend their invitation to me. They wanted Mr Ridley and my sister to spend the Festive Season with them, and, when they were told that I had arranged to be with the Ridleys, insisted I come along. May I enquire after your family? As you may recall, I have met several of them—Lady Catherine, Miss de Bourgh, and Colonel Fitzwilliam. I hope they are all well."

Miss Darcy lifted her chin an inch or two and almost looked at Elizabeth. "They are. I have not seen my aunt or Anne in some time, but the colonel was at Pemberley in the autumn."

"I am glad to hear it. Will you tell me what new music you have learnt of late? I have taken the advice your aunt was so good as to give me when I was in Kent last year and have been practising more." With Jane no longer at Longbourn, playing the pianoforte was a welcome diversion from what she could only call loneliness.

As they spoke over the next ten or so minutes, Elizabeth was pleased to see Miss Darcy relax. When Jane and Miss Ledbury ended their conversation and sat with them, Miss Darcy was able to respond to their remarks with reasonable ease.

After the gentlemen joined them, Elizabeth excused herself when she saw Mr Darcy approaching. Knowing he did not wish for her company, she left brother and sister to talk. James Ridley immediately captured her attention, and she sat with him; Mr Bingley soon joined them.

"It is very good to see you again, Miss Bennet," he said.

He was as amiable as ever, and she responded in kind.

"What a coincidence to discover you all know each other," James Ledbury said. "That is a word I have heard more in the last five hours than in the previous five years, but it does suit the circumstances."

"My sister had not met Miss Darcy before," Elizabeth said, as if that made a material difference. She did not want the Ledburys to assume there was more friendship between them than there was. "It is above a year since I saw the Darcys and Mr Bingley, and even longer since my sister has."

James Ledbury gave her an odd look, eyebrows raised as if both curious and discerning. Elizabeth felt her cheeks begin to heat and turned to Mr Bingley.

“How are your sisters and Mr Hurst?”

“Very well,” Mr Bingley said. “They are with Hurst’s family for the Festive Season. Shropshire. I did not like to go with them, so here I am. And your, um, sisters and parents? They are well?”

Elizabeth said that they were and shared a little news about people he had met in Hertfordshire. She noticed that he glanced towards Jane more than once. She recalled that he had always admired Jane’s beauty—what man did not?—and Jane looked particularly lovely this evening in a deep blue gown.

He said, “I had not heard that your elder sister was married. It was recent?”

“She and my cousin were married three months ago. Since it has been so long since you have seen them, your ignorance of the affair is not such a surprise,” James Ledbury replied. “Will you play for us this evening, Miss Bennet, or would you prefer a night off from entertaining us? We could play cards or another game, or if you would like, I shall simply promise to devote myself to amusing you with my conversation.”

Elizabeth found his speech verging on rude; it suggested that he wanted Mr Bingley gone. In truth, a part of her did, too, because she did not know what to say to him.

“Amusing conversation tonight, if you please,” she said. “But I would not wish you to strain yourself. Feel free to call on reinforcements.”

He laughed. “You wound me. I wish for nothing but your company, and you find that insufficient for your pleasure. Young ladies can be very hard, can they not, Mr Bingley?”

Mr Bingley, who had had his head twisted so that he was looking at Jane, Thomas, and Miss Ledbury, startled to hear his name. “Oh, yes, of course. If you will excuse me.” He stood and, to no great surprise, joined the very people he had been so interested in.

Elizabeth asked James Ledbury what he knew of his siblings’ arrangements for the next fortnight. She had heard it all from Miss Ledbury, but it would occupy him and demand little from her. While he spoke, she reflected on the two weeks she had already spent at Blackthorn Manor. From her earliest days, even hours, in the house, James Ledbury had singled her out. She did not take his flirting seriously; he wanted someone new to talk to. Like her, he was energetic, and they walked together in the house and outside,

when the weather permitted. He was handsome in his own way, his golden hair tinged with red, his jaw square and strong, but he was nothing to Mr Darcy, whose dark looks she found more enticing. He lived in Leicester and was a barrister, work he said he enjoyed.

Elizabeth found her eyes drifting towards the Darcys more than they ought. At different times over the next half an hour, she saw them talk to Mr Ledbury and Thomas. After the latter left them, they whispered to each other, rose, and Mr Darcy announced that they were retiring for the night, blaming travel for their fatigue. Elizabeth watched them leave the room, her eyes lingering on the closed door until James Ledbury recalled her to their conversation by asking if she skated.



* * *

What was I thinking? Darcy asked himself as he paced in his bedchamber the following morning. The question had been his constant companion since the moment of their arrival. Ledbury's invitation had seemed opportune. He and Georgiana could avoid spending the holiday either alone at Pemberley or with Lady Catherine, and it would provide his sister with the chance to become more comfortable in company.

But I did not know she would be here. To see James Ledbury with her— It is beyond intolerable! The man acted as if he had known Elizabeth for months, not the two or three weeks Darcy believed she had been at Blackthorn Manor. Resting his forehead against the cold, damp glass of the window, he closed his eyes. He wished the best for her, yet he could not deny that he was relieved to discover that she had not married. Just the thought of her being another man's wife made him feel as if someone had reached into his chest and ripped out his heart.

Take hold of yourself, man! You are Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley. Act like it, for yourself and for Georgiana. It is past time you go down to breakfast.

Two minutes later, he collected his sister to escort her downstairs, and they joined the others in the breakfast parlour. They were the last to arrive.

“Good morning, Miss Darcy, Darcy,” Ledbury called. “I hope you found your rooms comfortable. We have just sat down.”

“Mr Darcy, do take this seat,” Miss Ledbury said, indicating the empty place to her left.

There was only one other empty place at the table—the one beside Elizabeth. She, the best woman he had ever met, smiled kindly at Georgiana. His sister seemed satisfied with the prospect of sitting beside Elizabeth, so he escorted her to her chair.

“I shall fix you a plate,” he said in a low tone.

Georgiana nodded and whispered her thanks.

By the time Darcy had filled a plate with muffins, fruit, and baked eggs and turned away from the sideboard, Georgiana and Elizabeth were chatting. Throughout the meal, he occasionally turned his eyes to the two ladies, while not neglecting the one at his side. Miss Ledbury was pleasant, but he could not say what they talked about. Mr Ridley was at his other side, and he had much rather have talked to him. They had met previously, but Darcy knew little about him and was curious about the sort of man the former Jane Bennet had married. He hoped to discover that he was a good brother to Elizabeth.

When we were together in Derbyshire, everything I longed for was within my grasp; I could almost feel it in my hand. All I wanted was another day or two, which I had every reason to expect I would have. Then I would have spoken, at least to ask if she would give me a chance to win her regard, even if she was not ready to accept an offer of marriage. Everything in her manner suggested she would say yes. Her ease when she called on Georgiana and when she and the Gardiners came to dinner, her attention to Georgiana, her looks to me. Even now, she is so good to my sister, so patient.

After breakfast, the party went into the withdrawing room to discuss the day. Darcy sat with Georgiana and Miss Ledbury on a sofa. Across from him were Elizabeth, Mrs Ridley, and James Ledbury. Bingley was in a chair that placed him between Miss Ledbury and Mrs Ridley, and Ledbury and Mr Ridley stood.

Ledbury said, “It is Christmas Eve. What do you all think about going out to gather the greenery to decorate and that sort of thing? It is a fine day—not a cloud in the sky, and the sun makes the cold

not feel so severe.”

“The servants will collect some of the evergreens, but we can search for interesting bits to add,” Miss Ledbury said. “We will need mistletoe for the kissing b—”

“No, we will not, Harriet,” Ledbury interjected. “No kissing bough. Our parents disapproved of them, and I do not want any of that sort of temptation in the house, either. You will have other opportunities to flirt.”

Miss Ledbury shrugged and twisted one of her curls around her finger.

James Ledbury’s voice carried when he said, “Miss Bennet, you must accompany me. I know the best places to search for the sort of thing we need, and I promise you a fine walk in return. You see, I have learnt the way to your heart; I shall show you trees and even try to scare up a bird or small animal for your amusement.”

She laughed. Darcy always liked it when she laughed, but that it was directed at another man made his fingers curl into fists.

“Am I so easy to understand, sir?” she asked.

“Oh, that you were!” James Ledbury feigned distress. “If you insist, we can admit a third to our party.”

“Very good. James, you escort Miss Bennet and—” Ledbury paused to look around the room. “Miss Darcy, would you like to go with them, or do you prefer to remain with your brother?”

In the end, the party divided themselves into three groups. Bingley went with James Ledbury and Elizabeth, Miss Ledbury insisted Darcy and Georgiana walk with her, leaving Ledbury and the Riddleys.



* * *

Elizabeth enjoyed the excursion, although she did not understand all the fuss about deciding who would walk with whom. They were hardly out of sight of the others. James Ledbury and Mr Bingley dove into a lively discussion about sport, and she gave herself over

to appreciating the day. The ground was bare and hard; the lack of snow made it easy to walk wherever they liked, and they wandered through a grove at her request. The crispness in the air was as refreshing as a good night's sleep, and she watched the shadows of the bare branches bounce on the ground as a breeze whispered by. They collected little to contribute to the house decorations, but they did find hawthorn and laurel.

Back at the house, Elizabeth joined the other ladies to take tea, while Mr Ledbury led the gentlemen into his study for a different sort of warming beverage.

Miss Ledbury sat beside Elizabeth, leaving Jane and Miss Darcy to their own conversation. Watching them, Elizabeth saw that Miss Darcy seemed comfortable, which was not a surprise given Jane's sweet nature; she would be easy company for the younger lady.

Miss Ledbury and Elizabeth discussed the expedition for a few minutes before Miss Ledbury said, "I have not had a chance to talk to you since the Darcys and Mr Bingley arrived. How surprised we all were to discover that you knew each other! You must tell me all about your past acquaintance with them. I met Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley in town, of course, but only at soirées or balls, where it is impossible to truly get to know someone; I did not previously know Miss Darcy. You can tell me what the gentlemen like or do not like."

"Oh." Elizabeth's eyes darted around the room—to Jane and Miss Darcy, the portrait over the mantel, the remaining milky tea in the cup she held. "I cannot claim any such knowledge of them. Our acquaintance was brief and long ago."

Miss Ledbury leant closer. One of her curls—which seemed particularly mousy to Elizabeth at the moment—swung forward. "I do so want them to enjoy themselves, to see that...well, that I am an attentive hostess. Anything you can tell me would be so helpful. Does Mr Darcy have a favourite dish? Would he be offended if we played games in the evening? Mr Bingley seems like such an amiable gentleman that I am not as worried about impressing him."

Elizabeth sat back and licked her lips as she contemplated her response. She had a sudden memory of a conversation with Miss Ledbury the previous week. They had been sitting in this very room, and Miss Ledbury had talked about wanting to find a husband.

"I did not much care during my first Season," she had said. "I

was too young to get married and wished to amuse myself. Last Season though...I own I was disappointed not to be betrothed by the time we removed to Blackthorn. I would be very well pleased if I am at least close to engaged before we return to town."

Elizabeth now realised that Miss Ledbury hoped to attach herself to one of her brother's friends. Amongst the gentlemen she had met while in Leicestershire, there had been none in whom Miss Ledbury had shown interest. *I could be mistaken, or-or she might prefer Mr Bingley, but please dear Lord, not Mr Darcy.* She should want Mr Darcy to find happiness in marriage, but it would be a terror to watch him fall in love with another woman.

Aloud, Elizabeth said, "I am afraid there really is nothing I can tell you that would be of assistance. Mr Bingley is amiable, as you said. Mr Darcy is... I found that it takes time and effort to understand him."

Miss Ledbury pinched her lips and tapped a finger on the side of her cup. Elizabeth swallowed the last of her tea and excused herself.



* * *

Wanting a few minutes to collect herself, Elizabeth remembered an errand she wanted to do and went to her bedchamber. She regretted it when, on her way back to the withdrawing room, she came face-to-face with Mr Darcy.

"Miss Bennet." He appeared as startled as she was by the encounter.

His eyes caught hers, and she felt instantly transfixed. She could not tell if her heart raced or stopped.

"I-I recalled a book I wanted to show your sister." Her voice sounded unsteady, and Elizabeth wanted to pinch herself so that she would stop being so ridiculous. "We talked about it last evening, and I thought she would enjoy it. Would you like to see what it is before I—" She held it out to him.

"No," he said. "I know you would not give her anything

inappropriate for a girl of her age. How are you?"

For some reason, his question made her eyes burn, and she wanted to crumple to the ground and let her tears flow. She struggled to keep her voice steady. "I am well. And you?"

He gave an awkward nod rather than say anything. All the while, he kept staring at her. "And-and your sisters and parents?"

"They are healthy and much as they ever were."

They stood in silence for a long moment. Elizabeth tightened her grip on the book; she longed to touch him, just put a hand on his arm for a second or two, and feel his warmth and strength. The fingers of her free hand twitched as if reaching for him, and she curled them into a fist before she forgot herself and acted inappropriately.

Mr Darcy cleared his throat. "Mr Ridley seems like a good man."

She had to blink to clear her thoughts enough to reply. She swallowed heavily, hoping to clear the tightness in her throat. "He is. Jane was fortunate to meet him; I believe they are happy."

"And you? Are you happy?"

Something in his eyes changed. They became more intense, and she had the sensation that he was digging into her soul. She wanted to cry out that no, she had not been truly happy a single day since they parted, that she could never be happy without him in her life. Instead, she nodded, forced her eyes away from him, and said that she had forgotten something in her bedchamber. Turning, she then fled back to her room for a minute of solitude.



Chapter Three

Speaking to Elizabeth Bennet privately when they met in the hallway was a greater challenge than Darcy had expected it would be. It took all his restraint not to touch her hair, which looked so soft, or run his finger along the ridge of her cheekbone, or simply clasp her hand in his. When she had said she had a book to show Georgiana, his heart swelled so much, it stopped beating for a second. As he watched her walk back to her bedroom, he silently reprimanded himself.

Stop being a fool, man. It has been over a year. Whatever she may have felt for me ended long ago. No doubt it died as soon as she read about Wickham and her sister. I showed that I did not deserve her in Kent, and after that summer, between Wickham and Bingley— With a grunt, he straightened the cuffs of his coat and went downstairs.

The afternoon was spent decorating the house. The gentlemen allowed the ladies to lead the way; their task, and his especially as the tallest amongst them, was to place the greenery where they were told. The sweet scents of evergreen, rosemary, and laurel, now and again combined with apples or oranges, tickled his nose. Colourful ribbons, soft next to the rough vegetation, were laced

through some arrangements.

Before retiring to dress for dinner, they lit the Yule Log. Darcy stood beside Georgiana and draped an arm across her shoulders. He was reminded of Christmases with his mother and father. Lady Anne Darcy had loved the Festive Season, and Pemberley had always been full of guests—including his cousins and other children so that he, too, had plenty of company—and gaiety. Georgiana was too young to remember what it had been like, since their mother had died when she was just three years old, but he did, and he indulged in a few minutes of melancholy. It did not help that Elizabeth was at Georgiana's other side.

Darcy went with Georgiana to her room. They sat in the delicate maple and brocade armchairs by the window, and he asked if she was enjoying herself and if she was comfortable with the ladies. He had known the party would be small and believed that would make it easier for his sister.

Georgiana nodded but kept her eyes lowered. He saw her bite her lip and waited patiently for her to speak.

At length, she said, "I felt awkward seeing Miss Bennet again. She left Lambton so suddenly last year. I had thought that..."

Darcy was relieved she did not finish her statement. He knew what she would say—she had expected him to marry Elizabeth. He had not told Georgiana the full story, but she knew Elizabeth's youngest sister had married George Wickham.

Georgiana continued, "She is so kind to me that I feel quite at ease with her. I think I shall like Mrs Ridley, and Miss Ledbury is very pleasant too."

"I am glad to hear the ladies are good company for you."

Again, she nodded and bit her lip; he would have to talk to Georgiana's companion about curing her of the habit.

"I think Miss Ledbury hopes that either you or Mr Bingley will..." She blushed.

"Take a romantic interest in her?" He had discerned as much from Ledbury's conversation. "Perhaps Bingley will. As far as I have seen, she is everything a young lady is expected to be, but she is not the one for me."

Georgiana lifted her head to look at him. He was certain from the expression on her face and in her bright blue eyes, so like their mother's, that she knew he still loved Elizabeth Bennet.



* * *

Elizabeth regarded her reflection in the dressing table mirror. She had just dismissed Jane's maid, Smith, who also attended her. She felt foolish and stupid after her encounter with Mr Darcy.

I was like a young girl, newly out and talking to a handsome gentleman for the first time. I will not make such a display again. I am two-and-twenty, and have enough life experience to be...stronger in the face of such a challenge. Indeed, the only proper response to the twists and turns of my acquaintance with Mr Darcy is to laugh.

To prove it, that is exactly what she did before changing her earrings to jade ones she believed better complemented the silvery satin of her gown. A knock on her door signalled that Jane and Thomas were waiting to escort her downstairs.

Christmas Eve was pleasant. There were no additional guests, but Elizabeth knew the Ledburys had arranged a party with their neighbours for the next day; she had helped Miss Ledbury with planning the menu and entertainments and such usual tasks.

The withdrawing room looked better with the new decorations, in Elizabeth's opinion. She often found the room too dark, especially in the evening, when the red walls seemed to absorb the candlelight. Now, the mantel and tables were adorned with vegetation that still looked alive, even though she knew it would fade in the coming days. She had suggested white ribbons and other bright bits and pieces, and she was happy with the effect.

The nine of them ate heartily and enjoyed sweet treats after dinner. They played cards and Miss Ledbury, Miss Darcy, and Elizabeth provided music. Elizabeth sang, but Miss Ledbury refused.

"Miss Bennet is so much better than I am. I am not so foolish as to give you cause to compare us." With that, she sent flirtatious smiles to Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley.

Mr Bingley obliged her by saying, "I refuse to believe you are anything other than the most charming of performers, Miss Ledbury!"

Elizabeth happened to be looking in Jane's direction as he spoke, and she thought she caught a scowl on her sister's face, but if so, it was quickly erased.

Do not be fanciful, she scolded herself. Truly, if I do not reform my attitude, I shall go mad by Twelfth Night. Mr Bingley is nothing to Jane. She assured me of that long before she accepted Thomas. Tomorrow is Christmas—a day for joy. I will take advantage of it and keep my thoughts firmly rooted in the present, not the past and what might have been—for either Jane or myself.



* * *

Elizabeth liked the church the Ledburys attended. The vicar spoke well, and the gothic edifice was architecturally interesting. On Christmas morning, a spirit of goodwill seemed to permeate the walls, and all around her, she saw nothing but happy people. Even Mr Darcy, sitting between his sister and Mr Bingley, seemed relaxed. Their eyes met several times, and she dared to offer him a small smile once, but other than pleasantries, they did not speak. Elizabeth knew it was for the best, but she yearned to hear his voice and look into his eyes.

Mr and Miss Ledbury had some dozen of their neighbours to spend the day at Blackthorn Manor. They arrived shortly after noon and were greeted by a luncheon. Elizabeth had met a few of them during her time with the Ledburys, but most of them were new to her, as they were to the Darcys and Mr Bingley. Miss Darcy looked at a loss with her brother busy with the gentlemen, and Elizabeth made sure to keep her close by as she conversed with several young ladies.

She is a sweet girl, but so shy, Elizabeth thought. I understand Mr Darcy hopes she will become more comfortable in society, but she cannot simply be dropped into a group of people and made to sort out how to do it on her own. Yet if he were always beside her, she would have no reason to exert herself. What she needs is... Elizabeth purposefully

pushed away such reflections. If things had transpired differently, she might be Miss Darcy's sister-in-law, in which case it would be her role to ease her transition into society. If she was doing that now, it was only because it had to be done.

When they were alone for a moment, Miss Darcy, her voice hushed, said, "Thank you, Miss Bennet. I-it has always been difficult for me to know what to say to people I do not know well."

Elizabeth dared to give her forearm a quick, gentle squeeze. "You will find it easier with time and practise." She ignored the way Mr Darcy watched them. *I am glad he does not think so poorly of me that he objects to his sister spending time with me. At least, it appears he does not.*

Dinner consisted of everything one needed for a proper Christmas feast—roasted goose and beef and pork, Yorkshire puddings, gravy, mincemeat pies, vegetables and relishes, jellies, custards, and more. What Elizabeth ate was well-prepared, but there was such an abundance of food that it was impossible to taste it all. In her opinion, which she would keep to herself, there was *too* much, and it screamed of Miss Ledbury attempting to impress her potential husbands. *I suppose the servants will eat what we do not, and I am happy for them. They work hard, and Christmastide is a good time to reflect on and show appreciation for all they do for us.*

Elizabeth sat between two of the Ledburys' neighbours; they provided good conversation, and she had no complaints. Miss Darcy was beside her brother, which Elizabeth was glad to see. At Mr Darcy's other side was Miss Ledbury. Despite her attempts to engage him, Mr Darcy was more interested in speaking to his sister and the gentleman who sat across from him. Even knowing it was wrong, Elizabeth was relieved.

Down the table to the other side, Jane sat next to Mr Bingley. The pair chatted as if they were the best of friends, and Elizabeth's brow furrowed as she saw Jane smile and blush; she even laughed.

The meal ended with a traditional pudding. As it was presented, Miss Ledbury spoke so that the whole table heard her.

"I am happy to announce that the receipt is one that has been in my family for generations. My brothers and I have had it at Christmas our entire lives, have we not, Edward, James?" Without waiting for her brothers to comment, she said, "We observe many of the traditions of our parents, even though they are no longer with us. Family is so important, as is honouring the memory of those

who came before us. Do you not agree, Mr Darcy?" She turned to him, her eyes wide and lips turned upwards. To Elizabeth, she seemed confident that it would be the start of a long and satisfying conversation. To avoid seeing it, Elizabeth turned to the lady beside her and asked which dish had been her favourite of the meal.

A moment later, James Ledbury, sitting beside Elizabeth's other neighbour, tapped her shoulder. She leant back to see what he wanted.

He winked and whispered, "My sister is on the hunt. I hope Darcy realises he is prey and, if he wishes to avoid being captured, knows to take cover. My brother would be just as pleased if Bingley is the one she catches. You know both men; which do you think would better suit Harriet?"

Elizabeth managed to chuckle and affect an unconcerned air. "I am sure I have no opinion on the matter."

After dinner, the entire party retired to the withdrawing room, the gentlemen deciding to forgo their time apart in light of the holiday. The room had been prepared for their merriment with additional candles and a buffet by one wall.

Mr Ledbury announced, "As you can see, we have biscuits, cakes, jellies, candies, marzipans, and fruits—everything you might want to celebrate the day and fill your bellies."

Miss Ledbury said, "There is more to come—pies, cold meats, and breads. Do enjoy the punch. It is our family's special receipt."

James Ledbury brought Elizabeth a cup before she decided she wanted one, and she felt a stab of annoyance with his continued attendance. *It was one thing when it was just the two of us, his siblings, and mine. There are others he would do well to talk to and whose company I might enjoy, especially tonight.*

She took a sip of the punch. It tasted strongly of orange and brandy and was too sweet for her; she wanted a little more spice too. *Oh, stop being so prickly!* Surreptitiously, she pinched her thigh. She could not account for her mood and was determined to enjoy the party. It was just the sort of thing she usually liked, especially after having no entertainment or company beyond the ordinary for months before coming to Blackthorn Manor. Accordingly, when someone suggested a game of charades, she was the first to agree. When Mr Ledbury requested music, she played and sang Christmas carols and listened attentively as several of the other ladies sat down at the instrument. All the while, she was friendly with

whoever happened to be by her side. What she did not do was allow her eyes to seek Mr Darcy or her mind to notice that he looked particularly handsome tonight in a green and gold waistcoat.

She wished she was as adept at ignoring Jane and Mr Bingley. Their conversation at dinner had evidently carried over to the withdrawing room, and Elizabeth seldom saw them outside of each other's company. Twice she saw Jane touch Mr Bingley's arm; once her hand had lingered longer than Elizabeth liked.

Joining them, she said, "What a delightful evening, is it not? How did you like your dinner? Does not Mrs Thompson play exceptionally well?" Mrs Thompson was the vicar's wife.

Elizabeth kept up a steady stream of questions and comments for almost ten minutes before she was interrupted by James Ledbury who called, "Miss Bennet, you must come settle the dispute my friend here"—he indicated the gentleman with him—"and I are having."

"Go on, Lizzy," Jane said.

The look in her eyes suggested she wished Elizabeth far away. Elizabeth went to James Ledbury with reluctance and a sick feeling in her stomach which had no relation to the rich food she had consumed.

Soon after that, Mrs Thompson offered to play so that those who wished to could dance. All the young people said that it was just what they wanted, and the furniture was quickly rearranged to provide enough space for the activity.

"You will dance with me, of course, Miss Bennet," James Ledbury said. "I would be mortally wounded if you stood up with another gentleman before me."

He grinned and laughed, and Elizabeth attempted to respond with the same light, easy manner he used. She had enjoyed spending time with him—*before* Mr Darcy's arrival. If she kept to her resolve not to think of the past, she might find the same pleasure again.

"We would not want that, sir. I humbly accept."

As they skipped and bounced through the lively dance, Elizabeth spied two other couples she did not especially like to see—Jane and Mr Bingley and Miss Ledbury and Mr Darcy. It made it difficult to keep her attention on her partner, but she asked him to tell her an amusing tale of a ball he had been to, and, during their time together, they traded several such anecdotes. It was almost enough

to keep her from thinking about Mr Darcy.



Chapter Four

Darcy had been telling the truth when he had told Georgiana that he thought Harriet Ledbury was a proper young lady. He would even say that she seemed like a nice enough one. That did not stop him from finding her tedious. She had practically tethered herself to him most of the day. How he wished she would transfer her attentions to Bingley. Miss Ledbury would be an excellent match for him, in terms of fortune and connexions, and Bingley would appreciate her friendly manner.

Or he would if he were not so occupied with Mrs Ridley. What is he doing? What is she thinking? And, while I am at it, why in blazes is Ridley not intervening? He spotted Ridley in an animated conversation with Ledbury and another gentleman. *I can understand that he is happy to see his cousin again, but he ought to talk to Ledbury less and his wife more. I pray this behaviour is a matter of spirits made high by the holiday and too much punch.* He found the receipt overly strong and had already cautioned Georgiana to avoid it.

Even when Darcy went to speak to Georgiana or some other guest, Miss Ledbury remained by his side, demanding his attention.

“Oh Mr Darcy,” she said in her worst transgression, “is there

anything pleasanter than a country house party? Edward tells me that Pemberley is simply magnificent. How you shall hate to leave it when you are married, Miss Darcy, but such is a lady's lot, and, after all, making a new home of one's own can be very exciting, I am sure." She accompanied it with just such a look that he longed to issue a set down.

Darcy sighed and rubbed his temple, hoping no one noticed. He knew he was in a foul mood, and blamed his friend's behaviour and having to play charades—a game he particularly despised—but knew that the real reason was having to watch Elizabeth. He loved to see her liveliness and had missed seeing her smile and hearing her laugh. But he hated having to witness gentlemen, especially James Ledbury, flirting with her and—even worse—seeing her flirt in return. She seemed to like James Ledbury too much for his comfort, even though rationally he knew it would be an excellent match for her.

When the dancing started, Miss Ledbury, who continued to ignore her guests in favour of staying by his side, regarded him, a smile on her face, until he was forced to ask her.

Fluttering her eyes, she said, "I would be delighted, Mr Darcy," and took his arm before he offered it.

Seeing Elizabeth standing up with James Ledbury and Bingley with Mrs Ridley did not improve his mood. He could not say what he and Miss Ledbury spoke about; it was too commonplace, as had been most of their conversations, for him to remember any of it. When he felt his jaw ache, he knew he was clenching his teeth, which no doubt meant he was also scowling.

Which is no way to behave in company. Elizabeth taught me that with her reproofs about my manner in Meryton. Besides, Georgiana will notice, and it will distress her.

For the second dance, he partnered Georgiana and was able to relax.

"You played very well," he told her, referring to her turn at the pianoforte. "I did not realise you and Miss Bennet had practised a duet. When did you have time?"

Georgiana blushed. "Yesterday. I told her I did not think I could play in front of so many people, and she suggested it. She said I might find it easier to perform a second piece if we first did something together, and she was right. She is very sensible."

Darcy smiled. He could listen to Georgiana praise Elizabeth all

day, but knew it would be better to change the topic. "Tell me what you have particularly liked about today."

When the dance allowed, they spoke about what they had done and speculated about how the Fitzwilliams and de Bourghs were getting along. Their aunt and uncle, the Earl and Countess of Romsley, along with their two sons and the eldest's wife and infant son, had gone to Rosings Park for the Festive Season.

Towards the end of the set, Darcy said, "If you would like to dance again, I will tell Bingley to ask you."

Georgiana bit her lip and nodded. Bingley was agreeable, and Darcy stood off to the side, sipping a glass of lemonade and watching them.

When a fourth and final dance was called for, Darcy succumbed to temptation and approached Elizabeth.

"Miss Bennet, will you do me the honour of dancing with me?"

When she looked at his proffered hand and seemed to hesitate, his heart sank into his slippers. But then she nodded. Her hand touched his, and he felt that familiar swelling in his chest. For a moment, he fantasised about closing his fingers around hers, her beautiful dark eyes meeting his, the curve of her lips teasing and enticing. He would pull her close, whisper words of love into her ear, and beg her to forgive him, to give him one last chance—

Shaking his head, he did as he ought and led her to the lines. Seeing that Elizabeth's attention was drawn into a corner of the room, he glanced that way and discovered that Bingley was, once again, standing with Mrs Ridley. He refused to concern himself with it, not when he could be talking to Elizabeth and rightfully claim her attention to himself for the next little while.

The music started, and they moved through the steps.

"Are you enjoying the party?" Darcy asked.

She produced a polite, stiff smile. "Very much. Are you?"

He nodded and, a minute or two later, said, "Do you stay much longer? I thought I understood you and Mr and Mrs Ridley would remain for Twelfth Night." *Please say yes.* It was difficult to see her, but he yearned for her company, and it did Georgiana good. A tiny voice in the recesses of his mind suggested that maybe, just maybe, she might pardon him for his past mistakes. If so, they could regain what they had had in Derbyshire. Rationally, he knew that such a hope was hardly worth admitting, especially in light of her frigid demeanour.

An odd expression flashed across her face. "We return to Northampton on the seventh."

"Bingley, Georgiana, and I leave the same day. Do the Ridleys go to town this winter?"

"I do not imagine so."

"Will you remain with them long?"

The dance separated them. When they were together again, she said, "My plans are not fixed. I might return to Longbourn or go to stay with my aunt and uncle which, I suppose, means I might be in town."

Darcy had liked the Gardiners a great deal. *I wonder if I ought to try to renew my acquaintance with them. I would like to, and if I did, and Elizabeth happened to be there... But to what purpose? I always must confront that question, as much as I do not like the answer.*

He said, "May I enquire after the Gardiners? I enjoyed meeting them."

Her eyes shot to his, though she soon looked away. "They are well, thank you. They were pleased to make your acquaintance, and Miss Darcy's."

They said nothing more, and, immediately after the dance was over, she curtseyed and went to her sister.

Soon after, the neighbours began to depart. Seeing that Georgiana was fatigued, he escorted her to her bedchamber, and retired for the night as well.



* * *

The following day was quiet for the ladies. Other than Mr Bingley, the gentlemen joined a fox hunt at a nearby estate. Elizabeth had not heard why Mr Bingley did not wish to go, and she saw little of him except when they met for luncheon in the early afternoon. She occupied herself writing letters to her mother, her sister Mary, and Charlotte Collins. She also spent time with Georgiana and assisted Miss Ledbury with several arrangements for the Twelfth Night ball

being held at Blackthorn Manor.

In the late afternoon, Elizabeth sat in the sitting room she shared with the Ridleys, curled up in an armchair with a thick shawl across her shoulders. Staring at a clock on the fireplace mantel, her thoughts drifted to her dance with Mr Darcy. Every word he said, every look he gave her had to be studied. That he had asked her to stand up with him had surprised her. While she was tempted to say that his questions about her plans were a sign that he hoped she was soon departing, sparing him and Miss Darcy the shame of knowing her, she did not believe it.

Not of him, not of the man I knew in Derbyshire last year. He has done nothing to prevent his sister from spending time with me while we are both here. I suppose I should simply be thankful that he is willing to meet as...I cannot say friends, so let me say acquaintances. With Jane married to his friend's cousin, perhaps he expects we might see each other again, and it would be better if we could be on good terms.

Elizabeth sighed, stood, and went to look out the window. The day felt long, and Elizabeth was beginning to feel the want of activity. She had come upstairs because she preferred this parlour to the withdrawing room, and the other ladies were busy—Georgiana writing to her cousin, Jane resting in her bedchamber, and Miss Ledbury with household matters.

Perhaps I should go for a walk. It is cold, but if I keep a good pace, I shall be fine. I need not stay out long. Who is that? She narrowed her eyes in an effort to make out a couple walking in the gardens. *It cannot be, but I think...no, it certainly is Jane and Mr Bingley. Not an hour ago, she said she was—I must have misunderstood.*

Her body felt suddenly heavy. Elizabeth had told herself that Jane's attention to Mr Bingley the day before, really what had at times looked like flirting, had been a product of too much punch and excitement because it was Christmas and they were at a party. But now...

Aloud, she implored, "Oh Jane, take care."



It began to snow the evening of St Stephen's Day and continued overnight. At breakfast, Miss Ledbury suggested they go sleigh riding.

"Our groundskeeper says that it is the perfect time for it. We have a sleigh, you know, and Edward hired a second one so that we could all go at the same time. I am so glad that it snowed! It looks ever so pretty. Do you not agree, Miss Darcy?"

Georgiana glanced at Darcy and stammered, "Y-y-yes. V-very pretty."

Darcy said, "We have a sleigh at Pemberley. My sister and I both like to take advantage of pleasant winter days."

At dinner the previous day, Darcy had noticed that Miss Ledbury was paying more attention to his sister. He suspected it was an attempt to gain his interest. Bingley's sister Caroline had behaved in much the same manner for years. As much as he did not long for it, he wanted to draw Miss Ledbury's attention away from Georgiana, because it clearly made her uncomfortable. Darcy had been hesitant to leave her to go hunting, but she had insisted. During the outing, he had told Ledbury that he had no intentions of marrying soon, going so far as to hint that his interests lay elsewhere. Darcy trusted that Ledbury would tell his sister, who would then have the good sense to transfer her efforts to Bingley. It would serve the dual purpose of saving him from her flirting and keeping Bingley occupied and away from Mrs Ridley—with whom he was again talking. The pair, along with Elizabeth, was seated at the other end of the table. Elizabeth—looking particularly lovely in a long-sleeved sienna gown which made her skin glow—appeared to be trying to take part in their conversation.

Ledbury said, "We will have to divide into one group of four and one of five, unless there is anyone who does not wish to go?" Everyone was keen, and Ledbury continued, "Very good. Harriet, you and I can ride with Thomas, Mrs Ridley, and"—he looked around the table—"Mr Bingley. James, you will not mind being with Miss Bennet and the Darcys."

"That suits me well." James Ledbury smiled across at Elizabeth. Darcy was pleased that she did not seem to notice; she was too busy studying her sister, a slight frown on her face.

"Oh, I do love a sleigh ride!" Miss Ledbury clapped her hands.

“It is so...festive, and I am very glad we are going. But, Edward, I shall join Miss Darcy’s party. I feel I have had very little opportunity to get to know her.”

Ledbury shrugged and said something to Mr Ridley.

Darcy gritted his teeth. *Well, I shall just have to make the best of it. Elizabeth will be with us; that is all that truly matters. I wish...but I had my second chance. It would be too much to expect a third.*

In the end, Miss Ledbury and James Ledbury accompanied him, Georgiana, and Elizabeth as they drove around the park, by a copse, past a lake, and back again. It would have been perfect, had the Ledburys not been with them. Then, Elizabeth would have been having a lively debate with him, not James Ledbury. Then, when he looked across from him, he would see the two ladies he loved best in the world, not Harriet Ledbury. *Then, if it were just Georgiana, Elizabeth, and me, it would mean Elizabeth was mine. Good God, why is it that everything she says and does make me long for her more and more?*

He tried to be polite and listen to Miss Ledbury’s prattle about how much she enjoyed country life and the feminine duties that came with it. *No doubt to impress on me what a good mistress she would make at Pemberley. Damn it, Ledbury, you were supposed to tell her she was wasting her time trying to attach me!* A snippet of Elizabeth’s conversation caught his notice, and he turned his attention to her. She, James Ledbury, and Georgiana were talking about books.

“You are giving me too much credit,” Elizabeth said. “I do like to read, but I seldom read extensively on any one topic. I had much rather learn about a wide variety of subjects, which might allow me to sound more intelligent than I am, but I am by no means an expert on anything. If you are looking for someone to admire in that regard, I give you Miss Darcy. I discovered just yesterday that she is an ardent student of botany and garden design.”

Georgiana tried to demur, but Elizabeth said, “It may not be fashionable, but I believe ladies should not be ashamed to acknowledge that they have interests beyond the usual feminine accomplishments. I do not say we should ignore our duties as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers—whatever role we are assigned by life and circumstance—but if we have the ability and inclination to deepen our understanding of something that piques our curiosity, why should we not?”

“And your curiosity is aroused by a great many things, my dear Miss Bennet. That I find admirable,” James Ledbury said.

“While I wish I had Miss Darcy’s dedication to one subject. It does not mean she excludes developing an understanding of other important matters. That would not be praiseworthy. But we ought to talk about something else; I am embarrassing her. I apologise, Miss Darcy.”

She smiled so sweetly, so genuinely at Georgiana, that he wanted to rip his heart out of his chest and hand it to her. She owned it already, and might as well have physical possession of it.

Miss Ledbury said, “How interesting. I adore a well-designed garden. Edward tells me that he has never seen finer ones than those at Pemberley.” She continued along the same vein, but her attempts to make Georgiana say more than a few words—not that she gave her much opportunity to respond—were unsuccessful. James Ledbury continued his discussion with Elizabeth, who appeared to be frustrated with his attempts to show that he admired her mind.

Can he not see it? Darcy wondered. The way she will not meet his eye, the tension around her mouth, the gentle arch of her right eyebrow. He does not understand her, and that alone means he does not deserve her.

Darcy was not sorry when they returned to the house. He whisked Georgiana upstairs so that they could refresh themselves—and have a few minutes of quiet—before joining the rest of the party for refreshments.



* * *

The sleigh ride had been an agreeable diversion. The clouds had cleared, and Elizabeth enjoyed the feel of the cold winter air, mixed with the bright sun, on her face, while the rest of her was warm beneath layers of clothing and rugs. There was a certain beauty in the winter landscape that had always appealed to her—the starkness of trees free of their leaves, the contrast of evergreen

against ice and snow, and the fresh scent that came with it.

James Ledbury's attentions had marred some of her pleasure. He was an amiable, respectable gentleman, and she knew he could afford a wife and family. She did not believe that his flirting meant he had serious intentions towards her. They had only known each other a few weeks, but she was convinced that she could not be happy with him. She might be a fool to reject even the possibility of a future as Mrs James Ledbury—her mother would doubtlessly say so, as might Jane—and she might feel differently had Mr Darcy not joined their party. But it would not be fair to any man to marry him when her heart and thoughts were full of another.

How I wish it had been only he, Miss Darcy, and I! We would have been our own little family had not Lydia—I know we would have been so happy. Miss Darcy is such a delightful girl. I would have loved to have her as my sister.

Elizabeth pressed her eyes closed and bowed her head, determined to banish such thoughts. Sighing, she opened her eyes and went to look out her bedchamber window.

I know I ought to avoid him—both of them, likely—but how can I? It would draw unwanted attention, and...and I am like a moth drawn to a flame where Mr Darcy is concerned. Will I ever conquer such feelings?



Chapter Five

After dinner on the twenty-eighth, Harriet Ledbury suggested they play a game. Everyone was agreeable, and, after some debate, she succeeded in carrying her point and *I Love my Love with an A* was selected. Based on his stony expression, Elizabeth suspected Mr Darcy wished for a way to bow out of playing. When Mr Ledbury opened his mouth, perhaps to protest, Miss Ledbury shot him a quelling look. Somewhat to Elizabeth's surprise, because he seldom showed a disinclination to telling his sister what she could not do, he simply rolled his eyes and shrugged.

Mr Darcy said, "Georgiana, perhaps you would prefer to play the pianoforte for us? A little music would not be amiss."

Miss Darcy's relief showed in her enthusiastic nod. At once, she stood and went to the instrument.

Elizabeth had played the game before, and, as long as everyone treated it as a silly way to pass the time, she did not mind. This evening, she felt a frisson of discomfort, however, given the people involved, especially Jane and Mr Bingley. She had no wish to watch Miss Ledbury flirt with Mr Darcy any further, either.

They drew letters from a bowl, and Thomas, whose scrap of

paper had a large ornate A on it, began.

He said, "I was rather hoping for B so I could take inspiration from my dear Jane, since we are not enough to reach J, but Mr Bingley has it. Let me see..."

While he considered his response, Elizabeth thought about how much she wished Mr Bingley had drawn the H. *Then perhaps he would have directed his response to Miss Ledbury. Oh, stop worrying about him, Lizzy. You have the D...*

Thomas said, "I have it. I love my love with an A because she is amusing. I hate her because she is adventurous. I took her to... Ascot, to the sign of the angel."

He smiled at Jane, and Elizabeth could not help remembering how often she had heard Mr Bingley refer to Jane as an angel; it made her want to groan. Jane returned her husband's smile, but to Elizabeth, it appeared forced.

"I treated her with apples," Thomas said, "and her name is Anne Anderson."

There was light applause when he finished. He bowed his head and said, "Mr Bingley, your turn."

Mr Bingley grinned. "Right. I love my love with a B because she is," he looked at Jane, "beautiful. I hate her because she is, um, betrothed."

That garnered a few chuckles, which Elizabeth was pleased to see. It meant he stopped staring at her sister. She glanced at Thomas to see if he had noticed, and saw that his eyes darted between Mr Bingley and Jane with what looked like curiosity, but he was soon distracted when Mr Ledbury whispered something to him.

Jane blushed and undertook a study of the room.

Mr Bingley scratched the back of his neck before continuing. "I took her to Bath, to the sign of the...bear. I treated her with buns, and her name is," he took a moment to look between Miss Ledbury and Jane, before finishing, "Beatrice," again he paused, this time to drop his eyes to his jacket, "Buttons." He grimaced. "Not very good, I am afraid. Someone else will have to come up with a clever response."

"I think it was charming, as long as you were thinking of the right lady when you said beautiful." Miss Ledbury smiled at him, dipping her chin so that she was in effect looking up at him, her eyes wide. The flirtatious expression made Elizabeth suspect her

hostess had transferred her attentions from Mr Darcy to Mr Bingley, and she was glad of it.

Jane said, "I think you were very clever, far more than I will be."

Mr Bingley did not seem to know which way to look. Elizabeth wanted to scream, *To the one who is not married, you absurd man!*

She held her tongue.

Miss Ledbury loudly cleared her throat. "I am next. I have drawn inspiration from someone I know whose name starts with a C, but do not ask me whom, for I shall not say." She giggled, and Mr Bingley grinned. "I love my love with a C because he is charming." Miss Ledbury pouted before continuing, "I hate him because he is cruel. I took him to Cornwall, to the sign of the corn. I treated him with cake, and his name is Charles Clarke."

Charles Bingley clapped and cried, "Well done, Miss Ledbury!"

At the same moment, Jane said, "Oh no," and began to search for something on the floor.

"What is it, my dear?" Thomas asked.

"My bracelet. The clasp must be broken, and it fell off."

Mr Bingley and Thomas both leapt to assist her. Miss Ledbury regarded the trio with scepticism, and Elizabeth agreed with her. The bracelet was soon recovered, and Thomas tucked it into his pocket.

"I will bring it to a jeweller once we are home," he said.

Bright pink spots formed on Jane's cheeks. "Oh, no, I am sure that is not necessary. My maid or I shall be able to fix it." She held out her hand for it, but he did not appear to notice.

Mr Ledbury said, "Who is next?"

Elizabeth was too busy contemplating Jane's behaviour to respond. *Could it be that Jane regrets marrying Thomas now that she has seen Mr Bingley again? Impossible! Yet...*

It occurred to her that fretting about Jane kept her from thinking about Mr Darcy. Her eyes drifted towards him, and she discovered that he was watching her. Elizabeth found herself getting lost in his regard. He was the handsomest gentleman she had ever encountered, and there was something about his eyes when he looked at her that robbed her of her ability to think.

"Miss Bennet, I believe you have the D," Mr Ledbury said.

Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush, and she tightened her grip on the edges of her paisley-patterned shawl. "So I do." With a steady

breath, she recited, "I love my love with a D because he is delightful. I hate him because he is dead. I took him to Devon to the sign of the daisy. I treated him with dirt." Elizabeth heard a couple of chuckles, a noise of surprise, and someone repeat her last the word. She did not know who, because her eyes had once again fixed on Mr Darcy, who was watching her with a soft smile on his face. "And his name is Dan Delion."

Mr Darcy's smile broadened, and he appeared to be silently chuckling. That meant more to her than the louder sounds of appreciation for her light-hearted contribution to the game.

"You are clever, Miss Bennet," James Ledbury said. "I knew you had something in mind as soon as you said 'dead', and it was confirmed when you said 'dirt'."

"I did not," Miss Ledbury said. "I thought she had gone mad or had a very interesting story about an old beau I would insist she tell us. Did you know, Mr Bingley?"

Mr Bingley, whose attention had momentarily drifted to Jane, assured Miss Ledbury that he had not. "But I am not surprised. I remember this one time when she and her sister—"

Mr Darcy interjected, "Bingley."

When Mr Bingley looked at his friend, Mr Darcy gave a decided shake of his head. Elizabeth was relieved when Mr Bingley acquiesced. She was certain he was going to talk about the days she and Jane had stayed at Netherfield after Jane had taken ill while visiting Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley. Thomas did not need to hear it. *I do not even know if he realises Jane had tender feelings for Mr Bingley. He must wonder...* Her brother-in-law, however, was again in conversation with Mr Ledbury. She knew they were good friends, but Thomas would do better to pay attention to his wife.

Miss Ledbury said, "Let us return to the game. I do adore it. Who is next? Who has E?"

Mr Darcy raised a finger, and Elizabeth found herself again trapped by his eyes until he gave a small cough. She looked away briefly but lifted her chin and watched him as he spoke, his voice an odd combination of trepidation and resignation. His eyes darted to and away from her repeatedly, causing her to blush.

"I love my love with an E because she is elegant. I hate her because she is elusive. I took her to Edale—"

"Edale?" James Ledbury interjected. "Is that a real place?"

The muscles in Mr Darcy's jaw tightened for a moment. "It is in

Derbyshire.”

“James,” his sister scolded. “Pray continue, Mr Darcy.”

“I took her to Edale to the sign of the eyebright. I treated her with elderberries, and her name is...Ellen Everton.”

By the time he finished, he was again staring at Elizabeth, and she could not look away. *Was there a message I am supposed to understand? If so, I fail to... Oh, what a wretched game! I shall never consent to play it again.*

Fortunately, Jane spoke. “It is my turn. I have the F.” She held up her piece of paper as proof. Thomas and Mr Ledbury stopped chatting, and Thomas turned to smile at his wife. “I love my love with an F because he is fine. I hate him because he is fickle. I took him to—oh, I cannot think of a place that starts with F.” Thomas leant towards her and whispered in her ear, and she blurted, “Forest Gate.”

Mr Bingley said he had never heard of Forest Gate, and Thomas explained that it was east of London. Elizabeth thought, *If nothing else, this game could provide a good geography lesson. I do not think that benefit outweighs the discomfort.*

“Go on, my dear,” Thomas said to Jane, who offered him a polite smile.

“To the sign of the fox. I treated him with filberts, and his name is Frank Foster.” She shrugged when she was finished.

James Ledbury sat forward and, with a grin, said, “My turn! I had hoped for a different letter.”

He looked at Elizabeth, and one eye twitched just enough to be called a wink. She pretended not to notice. Since the Darcys and Mr Bingley had arrived, his manner towards her had become bolder, and she did not like it.

“But I have what I have,” he continued. “Do not fret, Darcy. Even though your sister’s name begins with a G, I know better than to incur your wrath by so much as teasing that she is my inspiration.”

Mr Darcy treated him to a glare, which, in Elizabeth’s opinion, he deserved.

“I love my love with a G because she is generous. I hate her because she is guarded. I took her to Gretna Green, to the sign of the goose. I treated her with gingerbread, and her name is—goodness, names beginning with G are rare, are they not? I shall have to take a cue from Miss Bennet and make up a clever one.”

Although he evidently expected her to favour him with a response, she remained silent, and he said, "And her name is Goldenrod Gorse."

Elizabeth heard Mr Darcy mutter a sarcastic, "Charming," that left her doing a quick count of the remaining people. With immense relief, she realised it was only Mr Ledbury. *If the game does not end with him, I shall make an excuse to retire.*

Mr Ledbury frowned. "Is it wrong to hope for a sudden emergency to call me away?"

Miss Ledbury huffed, and James Ledbury said, "Edward, be a good sport. We all did it."

Mr Ledbury's scowl deepened. "I will take my turn, but can we all agree to find a different game after this?" He shot a quelling look at his sister when she seemed prepared to protest. Mr Bingley looked disappointed, but no one else did.

Mr Ledbury spoke quickly, as though he had been thinking of his response all along and could not wait to finish. "I love my love with an H because she is healthy. I hate her because she is heavy. I took her to Halifax, to the sign of the hare. I treated her with ham, and her name is Helen Harper. There we go. I could use more tea, perhaps a little something to nibble on. Harriet?"

Mr Darcy practically sprang to his feet and went to the pianoforte. Elizabeth let her eyelids fall and stifled a sigh of relief.



* * *

Darcy tore at his neckcloth, throwing it onto the chair in his bedchamber as soon as it was no longer strangling him. His jacket was already there, his waistcoat unbuttoned. He felt like a caged animal, and he almost kicked the thick wood frame of the bed as he strode every inch of the room.

What was I thinking? E for elegant and elusive. Elizabeth the elegant. Elizabeth the elusive. I might as well have fallen at her feet right there and begged her to accept me!

He went to the window and thrust the heavy brocade drapes aside. *Stop it, man! She does not love you, does not even like you enough to marry you. Perhaps once...*

He pressed his forehead and hands against the cool glass and attempted to stave off the tears that burned at the back of his eyes. Several minutes later, he was calm enough to sit by the fire.

Dandelion. He chuckled at the memory and wished the others had treated the game with the same light-heartedness—himself included. Miss Ledbury's behaviour made him suspect Ledbury had finally told her she had no hope of being Mrs Darcy. She could not have been more obvious about her interest in Bingley, though Bingley seemed oblivious to it, and to the lady's charms.

What the devil is he thinking? He should not be giving Mrs Ridley so much attention. Will I be forced to once again interfere in his relationship with the woman?

With a groan, he slid down the chair and covered his eyes with his forearm. *What horror being here is! How I wish I could think of an excuse for Georgiana and I to leave.*



* * *

The next morning, Darcy manufactured a private interview with Bingley. They were in one of the smaller, disused parlours. With no fire lit, it was cold. Neither man sat.

"Why the devil are you paying so much attention to Mrs Ridley?" Darcy asked.

"What do you mean?" The laugh Bingley produced did not hide the knowledge of his guilt.

"Since the moment we arrived, it is almost as if we were back at Netherfield Park. I have seen you flirting with Mrs Ridley again and again. I would be surprised if others have not noticed. They soon will if you do not desist. She is married, Bingley."

Bingley walked away from Darcy. He stopped by a table and began to rearrange the items on it. "She is an old friend. I enjoy her

company.”

“That is not how you are treating her. I say yet again, Bingley, she is *married*. You had your chance with her. You decided not to pursue it. Do you remember? I told you in the spring of twelve that, upon reflection, I believed I had judged her too harshly when I said she did not admire you, that perhaps she did not show her feelings to the world. You decided not to return to Hertfordshire. That summer, I confessed that I knew she had cared for you, likely still did, and had been in town that winter, but your sisters and I had hidden it from you. Do you recall what you said?”

Bingley made a half-hearted shrug, and Darcy continued, “I do. All the fond talk about your time in Meryton, all the memories seeing Miss Elizabeth recalled, vanished. You found it interesting, but so much time had passed. There was another lady you liked. You gave up your chance to reconcile with her and to discover if your feelings were genuine. To now devote yourself to her in this way is unseemly.”

Turning to face Darcy, Bingley said, almost apologetically, “She is the loveliest lady I have ever met. So gentle. Ridley does not appreciate her as he ought.”

Darcy felt his patience about to snap and curled his hands into fists. “Do you hear yourself? How do you think this ends? At best, hurt feelings—including Mr Ridley’s, which could only damage her situation—at worst, gossip and scandal. You are too intelligent to let that happen. There are other people in the house; give them your attention, not a married lady.”

“Do you mean Miss Ledbury? She is nothing compared to Jane, not in looks or temperament or—or in the feelings she evokes in me.”

Darcy hung his head and sighed. “I am not saying you have to marry her, or even like her. If you cannot enjoy her company, there are others with whom you could spend your time. You hardly know James Ledbury, and I think you and he would get along well. Or Mr Ridley. Perhaps if you talked to him upon occasion, you might realise that he makes a very good husband for Mrs Ridley.”

Bingley strode to the door. “Enough, Darcy. I am sorry you disapprove of my behaviour. You have told me. Let that be an end of it before we truly argue.”

The sound of the door banging shut as Bingley left the room felt like a blow to Darcy’s stomach. He rubbed his forehead and took a

minute to talk himself into a better mood before going to find his sister.



Chapter Six

That afternoon, Elizabeth stood in the withdrawing room watching the Yule Log smoulder. She hoped it would remind her of the joy she usually felt at this time of year. It had been a trying morning after a disagreeable evening. After playing ‘I love my love with an A’, Mr Ledbury and Thomas had sat down to a game of chess. Mr Bingley talked to Jane and Miss Ledbury; Elizabeth had attempted to distract Jane, but she would not budge from her position. When James Ledbury had tried to engage Elizabeth in conversation, she had escaped—first by sitting with Miss Darcy at the pianoforte, then by finding a chair in a corner and burying her nose in a book until it was late enough to retire to her bedchamber.

She had just come from a terrible, disconcerting encounter with Jane. Elizabeth had felt compelled to speak to her about her manner towards Mr Bingley. The previous days were enough to excite her concern, and this morning, she had discovered Jane, her arm in Mr Bingley’s and cheeks rosy, as they walked downstairs to join everyone in the breakfast parlour. They had been touring the gallery. After breakfast, while Thomas was riding with Edward and James Ledbury, Elizabeth had asked to speak with Jane in their

sitting room.

“I have seen how much you enjoy renewing your acquaintance with Mr Bingley.”

Before she could say more, Jane stood and began to walk around the room, although she had no clear purpose in mind. “I have. I see nothing wrong with it.”

“To taking pleasure in seeing an old friend again? No. But, Jane—I hardly believe I am going to say this—”

“Then do not,” Jane interjected.

“I feel I must. You are flirting with him. It is wildly inappropriate—”

Jane turned to her, but her eyes did not meet Elizabeth’s. “You have no idea what you are talking about, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth stood so that she was not looking up at her sister. “I know what I have seen again and again since he arrived. You cannot deny that you do not act like you and he are nothing more than indifferent acquaintances. Anyone would suppose you and he were weeks, maybe just days, away from an understanding—or at least that you hoped so. You think that Thomas does not see, but after last night, I am convinced that he does. I thought you were happy with him. Before you accepted him, you told me you no longer had tender feelings for Mr Bingley.”

Jane turned her back to Elizabeth and went to the window. Her fingers drummed on the glass as she looked outside.

“Jane?” Elizabeth asked when the silence between them stretched to over a minute.

“I truly loved him, and we never had the opportunity to...” Jane’s voice was full of sorrow. “I do not know why he never returned. His sisters must have convinced him to give me up.”

In Elizabeth’s opinion, if Mr Bingley had genuinely loved Jane, nothing his sisters—or Mr Darcy—could have said would have kept him from seeking her out. “What about Thomas?”

“Marriage is not what I thought it would be. My husband...lacks passion. He is always so busy doing this or that for his father. My mother-in-law asks nothing of me, and I do not even have a child to occupy my time. Seeing Mr Bingley again, I know I would have been so much happier with him.”

Elizabeth fell back into the chair, and she felt the blood drain out of her face. It took a moment before she trusted that her voice would not shake. “I am sorry that marriage is not what you

expected, but it has only been three months. A period of adjustment is surely necessary.”

With unexpected anger darkening her tone, Jane spun to face her and said, “What you know about it? You are not married. You have rejected the only two men who ever offered for you. Do you even know what it is like to be in love? I do!” She hit her chest with a fist. “I know what it is to love, know you are loved in return, and lose it. He *did* love me, Lizzy, I know he did, and he still has feelings for me, although we dare not speak of it.”

There was no purpose to comparing her situation with Jane’s, and Elizabeth remained silent about Mr Darcy. “If that is the case, then I am very sorry for both of you. But, Jane, it is impossible. Spending so much time with him cannot make the situation easier. It can only lead to gossip.”

Jane’s cheeks became red, and her jaw trembled enough that Elizabeth saw it despite the distance between them. Her sister shook her head. “In another ten days, we return to Northampton. He and I will be separated again, perhaps forever this time. I will take every minute of happiness I can in his company before then.”

Having said this, Jane had left the room, leaving Elizabeth to bury her face in a cushion and growl out her frustration and fear.

Elizabeth had not known what to do with herself. Remaining alone invited her anxiety to take root in her thoughts, so she had sought company. In doing so, she found herself in the withdrawing room, gazing at the Yule Log. That it still burned, though faintly, so long after it was lit was supposed to be good luck.

At least we dine out this evening. I know I could use the distraction of other company, and I imagine I am not the only one. I can only hope Jane and Mr Bingley show some sense and behave appropriately.

The door opened. Looking over her shoulder, Elizabeth saw Mr Darcy. Turning back to the fireplace, she pressed her eyes closed. *He will go away again, having no desire to spend time with me unnecessarily. Goodness, I am in a melancholic mood, and at Christmastide of all times.*

Her ears expected to hear the door closing; instead, footsteps tickled them and—somehow—she felt him draw closer. Even with her eyes closed, she knew when he was beside her. She felt her body sway with longing to lean into him, to feel his arms around her. Jane thought Elizabeth did not know what it was to love, know you were loved in return, and lose it, but oh, Elizabeth did!

“Miss Bennet.” Mr Darcy’s voice was as soft as a caress.

Elizabeth opened her eyes and straightened her shoulders. “Mr Darcy. You find me contemplating the history of the Yule Log. Do you suppose today is the day it will stop smouldering? I know Mr Ledbury wishes to save a splinter of it for next year, but I fear it will be difficult to preserve any of it while also burning enough coal to keep us from freezing.” What was left of the log was pushed to one side of the large hearth.

“I-I do not know.” After a moment, he said, “How are you today?”

Elizabeth lips twitched into a quick smile. “I am well, thank you. I hope you can say the same.”

He made a noise of agreement.

Grasping for something to say, and hardly knowing what was going to come out of her mouth, Elizabeth said, “I am alone, as you see. I thought I might find your sister or Miss Ledbury, but I ended up here. There is something quite peaceful about watching it.” She nodded at the fire.

“Georgiana is writing to the colonel. I do not know where Miss Ledbury is.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Attending to some household matter or another, I suppose.”

“I told Georgiana about your response during the game last night. She found it very amusing, as did I.”

After glancing at him, she wished she had not. *I suppose it was Jane’s talk of love and allowing herself to enjoy Mr Bingley’s company while she has it. Even if Mr Darcy were inclined to flirt with me, I could not behave in such a way, but—* But she loved him, and it was difficult to be so close to him yet know there was a gulf as wide as the ocean between them.

“I am glad.” She cleared her throat before continuing, “It is not my favourite game, but if I am going to play it, I cannot treat it with seriousness.”

“I do not like it,” admitted Mr Darcy. “I never have, and yesterday did nothing to change my opinion of it, your witty response notwithstanding.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “What say we join forces to ensure we play nothing but casino or whist from now on?” *Oh dear God, did I truly just say that? Join forces? Just when I thought about not flirting with him! What must he think?*

When he remained silent, Elizabeth wanted to cover her face with her hands and run away. She could think of nothing to say to ease the awkwardness.

At length, he said, "I wou—"

The rest of his statement was destined to remain a mystery. They were interrupted by Mr Ledbury.

"Ah, Darcy, there you are. I wanted to ask you something. Miss Bennet, I hope you are having a pleasant day."

Turning to face him, Elizabeth said that she was. "Have you just come in? What is the weather like? I was thinking about going for a walk."

Mr Ledbury said, "It is cold but not too cold for you, I believe. The paths through the gardens on the west side of the house are clear." To Mr Darcy, he added, "Miss Bennet had not been here a day before I discovered that she likes nothing better than a walk."

"Very true. I shall leave you to your conversation." Elizabeth inclined her head to both gentlemen and began to walk towards the door. She had not gone ten steps before Mr Darcy's voice stopped her.

"If you would like company, I am sure Georgiana would go with you. She is in her bedchamber and should be finished her letter by now."

Elizabeth met his eye for an instant. "Then I shall ask her."

His eyes were warm, and his lips turned upwards at the corner in that slight way that, once upon a time, she believed showed he felt genuine pleasure. Today, walking up the broad staircase, she convinced herself that she had imagined both.



* * *

Sitting across and down the table from Elizabeth while they dined with neighbours of the Ledburys, Darcy tried to attend to his dinner companions. He had never met either of them before, and, while they seemed pleasant enough, he found his foot tapping restlessly,

and only the strictest of control kept him from being out-and-out rude. Elizabeth showed none of his discomfort; she even seemed to be enjoying herself, chatting easily with those around her, laughing upon occasion.

I wish I had remained at Blackthorn with Georgiana. Because his sister was not out, he had excused her from accompanying them. *If I had, I would not have to spend the night dreaming I was sitting next to Elizabeth, that her bright eyes were looking on me with such mirth, that her smiles were all for me.* At least James Ledbury was at the other end of the table from her.

Darcy's thoughts drifted to when he and Elizabeth had been alone that afternoon. If only he had had more time! What he would have done with it, he knew not, but at the very least, he would have talked to her more, added to his bank of remembrances of the only woman he would ever truly love. He wondered if reliving them over and over in the coming years would dampen their lustre, make them seem less special, if, with repetition, they would become banal.

It will never happen. She will always be the one lady with whom I could have found happiness. How could imagining her smiles when she looked at me in Derbyshire, or her laugh and teasing, ever fail to move me? Even today, the look of pleasure she gave me when I suggested she ask Georgiana to walk with her. Such a little thing, but I swear it meant something to her. Yet, in truth, I was thinking of myself, that I like the idea of them spending time together, almost as if they were the sisters I so wanted them to be.

Knowing Elizabeth was with Georgiana also meant that she would not be alone with James Ledbury. Even though he had not been at Blackthorn Manor a week, he had seen Elizabeth and James Ledbury walking together several times before breakfast. Once, Darcy had been on the point of flying down the stairs to join her because she appeared to be alone. Before he could turn away from the window of his bedchamber, though, James Ledbury had approached her, and the two of them had walked on together.

After dinner, there were cards and music, all of which kept him separated from Elizabeth. He was not sorry to see the evening end.

There was rather a shuffle when those of them bound for Blackthorn Manor walked out to the carriages. Darcy's chief wish was to keep Bingley away from Mrs Ridley. They had not sat together at dinner, but in the withdrawing room, Darcy had too

often seen them together, first at cards, and then during the music. He did not want Elizabeth distressed by his friend's poor decisions. *Has she not been already? No, that was my fault. If I had told Bingley the entire story immediately instead of only hinting he return to Hertfordshire— But even by April, less than five months after he had last seen Jane Bennet—towards whom he had felt such a passion—it meant nothing to him that she might care for him. Perhaps I ought to have dragged him back to Netherfield. Clearly, all it takes to reignite his feelings is seeing her again.*

The result of what must have looked like a ridiculous commotion while eight adults decided who would go in which carriage was that Darcy succeeded in ensuring Bingley was with him and, to his delight, so were Elizabeth and Miss Ledbury.

Darcy held out his hand to help Elizabeth into the carriage, but she said, "Oh," and looked down at the ground as though she had dropped something. The consequence was that Miss Ledbury entered the carriage first.

Elizabeth offered him a brief smile as she held up a handkerchief. "Silly me." She rested her hand lightly in his as she stepped up.

Darcy elbowed Bingley, who was watching the other carriage pull away. When Bingley looked at him, he gestured that he wanted Bingley to go ahead of him. *This way he will be opposite Miss Ledbury, and I shall be able to gaze at Elizabeth—as much as the light permits—perhaps even talk to her.*

Two or three minutes into the drive, Darcy began to suspect that Elizabeth was as pleased with the arrangements as he was—at least as far as Bingley was concerned. He was certain he caught a smile of satisfaction on her face as she looked at their companions, and she did what she could to encourage conversation between Bingley and Miss Ledbury.

"Mr Bingley," she said, "did you know that Miss Ledbury is an accomplished painter? Have you seen any of her works? You would find them delightful." Another time, she mentioned Scarborough, saying that she had never been, but Miss Ledbury had, and she also introduced the topic of the Season and her certainty that they must have many acquaintances in common. It meant that, apart from Elizabeth's occasional statements to direct the conversation, the voices that were most heard were those of Miss Ledbury—seemingly pleased for any opportunity to talk and flirt with Bingley

—and Bingley.

Oh, she is clever, he thought. *What a good opportunity to push those two together.*

Back at Blackthorn Manor, Darcy jumped out of the carriage so that he, not a servant, would have the pleasure of helping Elizabeth down. Bingley assisted Miss Ledbury, the pair still chatting about balls. Elizabeth regarded them, her eyes sparkling and smile broad. In a moment, she turned to him.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. I believe I will retire immediately, so I shall also bid you good night.”

Darcy bowed and wished he could take her hand, perhaps even kiss it. “Good night, Miss Bennet.”



Chapter Seven

The next morning, Darcy did not see Elizabeth until he walked into the breakfast parlour. He frowned in disapproval when he saw Mrs Ridley and Bingley talking to each other and forced his features into a happier expression. He thought he caught a glimpse of Elizabeth watching them from across the table.

After the usual greetings, Elizabeth said, "We are a small party this morning, as you see. Mr Ledbury, his brother, and Thomas have gone to visit some old servants."

"I was a child, not more than five or six, when they retired from service, else *I* would have gone," Miss Ledbury said, an edge to her voice. "My brothers and cousin chose to ride, and I did not think it wise for me to attempt it in this cold. This sort of attention means so much to those people. Do you not agree, Mr Bingley?"

Bingley looked away from Mrs Ridley, his head jerking from person to person. "Eh? Oh, yes. Yes, of course."

Darcy felt like slapping him.

"So," Elizabeth said, speaking a little louder than necessary, "what shall we do this morning? Does anyone have anything particular in mind?"

When that topic failed to elicit much discussion, Darcy spoke about the previous evening. Elizabeth jumped into the subject with enthusiasm, and it was enough to stop Bingley and Mrs Ridley from ignoring the rest of them.



* * *

In the end, it was a busy day. Elizabeth and the other ladies attended a luncheon, and that evening, the whole party dined with friends of the Ledburys and joined them at a concert. Elizabeth was glad of the activity. She sensed a growing tension in the air amongst those at Blackthorn, though she knew it might just be between her sister and herself. Jane had said little more than was necessary to her since their conversation. She understood that her sister was vexed with her, but still felt she had been correct to caution Jane about her behaviour towards Mr Bingley. Elizabeth continued to do what she could to keep the pair apart and to encourage Mr Bingley to seek Miss Ledbury's company or that of the gentlemen. It appeared to be working, in part because—and she might be mistaken—Mr Darcy seemed to want to keep his friend separated from Jane as much as she did.

The next day, a week after Mr Bingley and the Darcys' arrival, began quietly, with everyone going off to pursue their individual activities after breakfast. Elizabeth had asked Jane what she was going to do, and Jane had shrugged; Elizabeth could only hope it did not involve a certain gentleman. She knew Mr and Miss Darcy were together and took the opportunity to finish a new book by Shelley she had borrowed from Mr Ledbury. He had encouraged her to treat the library as her own during her stay, and she had taken him at his word. As soon as she finished the last word, she left the comfort of the sitting room to return the volume and find a new one to read.

Her hand was still on the doorknob when she froze. Inside the library, by the window, stood Edward Ledbury and her brother-in-

law. They were close together, Mr Ledbury's hand on Thomas's arm.

Thomas said, "I cannot believe it of her."

"Thomas—"

Mr Ledbury got no further. Elizabeth, her heart racing because she knew they must be speaking of Jane, had stepped backwards, intending to flee, but they caught sight of her.

"I beg your pardon." She held up the book. "I-I will return later."

The men spoke at the same time, Thomas saying her name, and Mr Ledbury encouraging her to stay, adding, "I must see to something."

Elizabeth stood to the side to give him room to pass through the doorway. Her mouth was dry, and she ran her tongue along her teeth, hoping it would help.

"Close the door, Lizzy. I want to have a word with you."

Elizabeth clutched the book to her chest and pulled her shawl more tightly around her body, telling herself it was just because she was cold. She would not meet his eye. "Oh?"

"About Jane."

Thomas began to pace, which only increased Elizabeth's desire to run away. Anger burned her insides—anger at Jane, Mr Bingley, and even Thomas for broaching the topic with her instead of his wife.

Thomas said, "When I met Mr Bingley previously, I recall him talking about an estate he had let and a lady he admired." He faced Elizabeth, who found herself swallowing heavily. "Was it Jane?"

How she wished she could say anything other than what she must; but lying would help none of them. "Yes. It was a long time ago. Until last week, they had not seen each other for more than two years."

He nodded his head three or four times and resumed his slow perusal of the room. "I wonder if marriage is what she expected it to be. If I am what she expected me to be. I love Jane, and I want her happiness. I believe we can be happy together, if that is what she wants. If I did not, I would not have pursued her."

I will not have this conversation with him. I will not interfere in their marriage. "I do not know what you wish me to say."

Elizabeth watched as Thomas, whose back was to her, shrugged. He was at the opposite end of the room when he turned to her. "Something reassuring, I suppose."

“You ought to direct your questions about her feelings to her.”

“You and she are so close...”

“That does not mean I hold all of her secrets or that I understand her feelings.” *Especially when they are about you and Mr Bingley.* “I cannot help you with this. If you will excuse me, Thomas.”

With that, she returned to her bedchamber as quickly as possible, not to leave it until she was expected below stairs in a couple of hours.



* * *

All that evening—from the moment she joined the others in the withdrawing room, through dinner, and the hours afterwards—Elizabeth wanted nothing more than to be alone. Their party was enlarged by seven guests. While they awaited their arrival, Mr Ledbury commented on how busy they were.

“I spend very little time at Blackthorn Manor. The two or three months I am here, I feel it is incumbent on me to see as many neighbours as possible. And it is Yuletide; everyone expects a great deal of rushing around.”

Miss Ledbury said, “You make yourself sound quite ancient, Edward! You are only thirty.”

He grumbled, “Give it ten years and see if you are not as bored with it as I am.”

Their brother laughed. “Ah, siblings. Delightful, are they not? I am afraid they are too different to ever understand each other. I, on the other hand, am a happy medium; I neither crave nor detest society. Do you not find me the most admirable Ledbury, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth made some vague reply.

The benefit of their being sixteen was that there were more distractions. Elizabeth observed Thomas watching Jane—and occasionally felt his gaze upon herself, as though she, too, had drawn his displeasure. She continued to do what she could to keep

Jane away from Mr Bingley and encourage him to spend time with Miss Ledbury; avoid James Ledbury; and, resist the urge to devote herself to Mr Darcy, who, she was certain, spent too much time watching her. She was frustrated, annoyed, tired, and confused, and the result was a headache. While most of the party played cards, she sat with Miss Darcy, trying to participate in a conversation about music. After a quarter of an hour, Miss Darcy asked if she was well.

“E-excuse me for being so forward, but if you are not, I would not want you to feel you must continue to talk to me when you would rather be quiet.”

Elizabeth smiled at her and patted her hand. “Thank you. I confess that I have a headache, and it is making me very tired.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” a deep voice behind her said.

It was Mr Darcy. She wanted to close her eyes and rest her head on his chest, feel his arms around her, perhaps let out a sob or two. She had noticed him distracting Mr Bingley several times when his attention appeared to be turning to Jane, and she wanted to thank him for it.

“Why do you not retire, Miss Bennet? You can slip away, and, if anyone asks, I will explain,” he said. “I do not presume that Georgiana will enjoy my conversation as much as she does your—”

“Brother.” Miss Darcy’s cheeks flushed.

Elizabeth squeezed her hand. “I had no notion your brother could make such jokes. My sisters and I tease each other mercilessly. I suppose they would say it was I who teased them and not the other way around.” She chuckled and was pleased when it seemed her words had eased the girl’s embarrassment.

“Come, Miss Bennet,” Mr Darcy said, holding out a hand to help her rise; she took it and stood. “I shall take your place beside Georgiana, and you can retire. Perhaps you would like Mrs Ridley to accompany you?”

Elizabeth met his eye and was certain she saw a recognition that she would ask Jane for assistance—not because she needed it, but as an excuse to have Jane leave the company, at least temporarily. Realising her hand was still in his, she quickly retracted it. “I shall ask her.” To Miss Darcy, she added, “I hope we can resume our conversation tomorrow. Good night.”

She went to Jane, who was sitting beside Thomas, who was speaking to James Ledbury. Elizabeth asked that she accompany her

upstairs. Jane was reluctant to leave.

“Please, Jane, I have a terrible headache.”

Jane’s eyes flickered to where Mr Bingley sat beside Miss Ledbury at a card table; the pair were chatting and laughing. “Of course, Lizzy. I am not needed here.”



* * *

Upstairs, Jane dutifully helped Elizabeth prepare for bed, sending the maid for peppermint oil with which to massage Elizabeth’s temples. Elizabeth was sitting with her eyes closed, half-asleep, as Jane tended to her, when she heard Jane’s soft voice.

“I have seen what you are doing with Mr Bingley, attempting to keep us apart. I do not blame you, Lizzy.”

The tone of her voice matched her words, and Elizabeth grasped one of her sister’s hands and kissed it. “I pray for you, Jane, and that you will find happiness with Thomas.”

Jane gave a small laugh that was almost pitiable. “He asked me about Mr Bingley, and I had to tell him the truth. We argued. He says he forgives me for not telling him immediately. I never did confess that there had been another man I admired. He is still angry, or perhaps he is simply hurt.”

“He will get past it.” Elizabeth spoke with more assurance than she was currently able to feel. She hoped now that Thomas knew about Jane’s former connexion to Mr Bingley, and they had talked about it, Jane would keep her distance from their old neighbour. Currently, she did not feel confident, which might be because of her poor health.

Jane sighed. “I hope so, and I hope I will have a child soon. That would make a difference, I believe. You know how much I have always longed to be a mother.”

Elizabeth opened her eyes to a narrow slit—it was all she could manage—and said, “It has only been three months. Uncle and Aunt Gardiner did not have a child until they were married two years. Be

patient, and I am sure you will have a baby. Thomas must surely want children too.”

Jane nodded and offered her a faint smile as she resumed her efforts to reduce Elizabeth’s headache. “He says he does, and he often speaks about what he will do with our children, where he wants to take them or what he wants to teach them. You are right, we have not been married long, and, although I find being his wife is not quite what I expected, I will...accustom myself to it. It is my duty.”

Elizabeth embraced her sister, and the two of them clung to each other for a long moment before Jane insisted Elizabeth lie down. She fell asleep to the gentle sound of Jane humming a soothing tune.



* * *

Before breakfast the following day, Darcy was pleased to secure a moment alone with Elizabeth. He knew he should not seek such encounters, but the more time he spent in the same house with her, the less he could control his desire to be near her and have her attention devoted to him, even if it was just for a minute here and there.

He followed her into the library and found her standing by the window, the bright sunshine making it seem like she glowed. *A beacon, calling me to her, inexorably.* She heard him enter the room and watched as he walked towards her.

“Mr Darcy.” She closed the book she was holding and let the hand which held the slim volume fall to her side.

He stopped a few feet away from her and thought how lovely she looked. She wore a long-sleeved, violet-and-cream-coloured gown and looked somehow warm and comfortable. “Are you feeling better this morning?”

“I am.” She lifted her chin a little and kept her eyes on his almost as if she dared him to suggest she was unwell. *Or as though*

she finds talking to me difficult, and she is resolved not to show it.

Even with that thought in mind, he could not simply wish her a good day and walk away, not so soon. "I..." He resisted the urge to lick his lips or fidget. "You have sometimes seemed..."

Her delicate eyebrows arched. "Please, speak plainly, Mr Darcy."

He dipped his chin in a single nod. "I believe you have noticed, as I have, that Bingley and your sister enjoy each other's company. I have spoken to him about it and am doing what I can to redirect his attention to Miss Ledbury. I suspect you are attempting to do the same."

Her shoulders seemed to relax, and she nodded.

"Good. Good. I hope that with the two of us working towards the same end, we will..."

"Be successful?" she offered when he could not find the words. "Whatever success looks like in such a case."

Confronted with her lovely face and bewitching eyes, he found himself babbling in a most unbecoming fashion. "Indeed. I think Bingley and Miss Ledbury are very well suited, and she would be an eligible match for him. I think even his sisters would approve. I do not know that anything will come of it, but at the very least, Bingley should take this opportunity to determine if he likes her rather than, well, flirting with your sister. He chose not to pursue her last year, and has no right to act towards her as anything other than an indifferent acquaintance now."

"What?"

Her clipped tone and round eyes made him stop and reflect on what he had said. *Which, it appears, was more than I had intended.*

"Mr Darcy, please explain yourself."

Darcy looked out of the window for a moment before telling her that he had twice hinted to Bingley that he should return to Hertfordshire—in the spring of 1812 and again that summer, at which time he had confessed everything to his friend. Both times, Bingley had shown no particular interest in renewing his acquaintance with the then Jane Bennet.

"Do you mean to say—? Mr Bingley's staying away had nothing to do with...with what I told you the last time we met in Lambton?"

There was a moment of silence before he said, "No."

"You hesitate?"

"It did not. He did not learn about her marriage until some time later, so no."

“You know that Lydia is married?”

Darcy nodded.

She furrowed her brow and tilted her head as she regarded him before saying, “Wickham wrote to my father not two weeks after they left Brighton, asking his permission. He said they had intended to go to Scotland, but then they decided to marry in town. He claimed his debts were exaggerated, he was able to pay them off, and, somehow, had enough to buy a commission in the regulars and marry a lady with no dowry. I assumed he had come by the money in a less-than respectable fashion.”

He swallowed heavily and struggled to keep his voice steady. “I hope she is well.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “Married to such a man? We do not write, but from what Jane and my mother say, she is satisfied.”

“You do not sound convinced.” Why, oh why, did they have to talk about the Wickhams?

“I am sure she is, but I doubt whether she deserves to be, or that her happiness will last for long. I am glad they married. It preserved Lydia’s reputation and that of my sisters and myself, but I do not forget the truth. I apologise for burdening you with it as I did that morning. If you will excuse me, Mr Darcy.”

With that, she practically ran from the room, leaving him standing alone and feeling bereft.



Chapter Eight

Later that day, Darcy again found himself in the library, this time with Bingley and James Ledbury. The ladies were in the withdrawing room; he did not know where Mr Ridley or Ledbury were. His attention wandered away from the conversation—something about James Ledbury's life as a barrister in Leicester—to his earlier one with Elizabeth. He was not sure what to make of it.

It did not sound like she blames me for either Bingley's failure to return to Netherfield or her younger sister's marriage, yet how could she not? But if she does not, then why— It did no good to go down that road, and he stopped himself before he went any further.

Regarding Bingley, now talking about growing up in Scarborough, he thought, *Mrs Ridley flirting with Bingley is surprising. Surely if she was happy with Ridley, she would not. I truly did not believe she cared for Bingley. As much as I allowed my—what did Elizabeth call it?—selfish disdain for others to twist my view of the Bennets, it was the conviction of Jane Bennet's indifference which most influenced my argument against her.*

By the time Elizabeth had assured him he was mistaken, it had been too late. Did that not prove that Bingley's attachment was

never serious? Darcy compared himself to Bingley. Despite all the time he had been separated from Elizabeth, his love for her had never wavered, even as he told himself again and again that it was hopeless, and he needed to conquer it and forget what the future might have been.

Bingley leapt to his feet. "I must find Miss Ledbury and Miss Darcy. I promised them they could show me the gallery and try to teach me something about art. I fear it is a hopeless case—and so I have told them—but they insisted!"

He grinned and practically skipped out of the room. Darcy rolled his eyes and hoped James Ledbury had not seen.

"What can you tell me about him?" James Ledbury nodded to the door to show he meant Bingley. "I do not know him well, but as an older brother, I think I should."

Darcy regarded him as he took a drink from his wine glass. "He and Miss Ledbury hardly know each other. If something were to develop in that direction, you need have no concerns."

The other man cocked an eyebrow. "No...wandering eye, shall we say? I had wondered."

Bingley, you bloody idiot! And why, might I ask, am I to answer for his behaviour? He swallowed his bitter thoughts. "They are nothing but old friends who were surprised to see each other again after so long. They were never more than that. Mr Bennet's estate was the nearest neighbour to the one Bingley leased. We saw the Bennets frequently during the two months we were there."

Apparently, his explanation was not entirely satisfactory. James Ledbury pursed his lips and observed him for a moment before saying, "But Miss Bennet was not such good friends with him? I assume that is the case since neither she nor Mr Bingley single out the other."

If James Ledbury thought he would get Darcy to confess to anything he did not wish to reveal, he was mistaken. "The difference was with his sisters. They and Mrs Ridley became close, but they and Miss Bennet did not."

James Ledbury made a noise that seemed to denote understanding. He then said, "Miss Bennet is a remarkable young woman. I am very glad she joined the Ridleys in coming to Blackthorn."

It was all Darcy could do to not tell the man to keep his distance from her, that she was too good for him.

James Ledbury continued, "I imagine she would make someone a fine wife. Not me, I regret to say. Frankly, I believe she deserves better than I can offer her."

They stared at each other for a minute. Darcy then lifted his glass in a silent toast and decided that perhaps James Ledbury was not such a bad fellow after all.



* * *

On New Year's Eve, the Ledburys' vicar, his wife, and several other couples came to dinner. Throughout the meal and afterwards, Elizabeth could not look at Mr Darcy. She was so confused after their last conversation. He had confessed the truth to Mr Bingley! From what he had said, he had done so soon after their dreadful argument in Kent, even if he did not tell Mr Bingley about Jane being in town that winter until later.

He believed me and tried to correct his errors so far back as that. I know he had changed by the time we met in Derbyshire, but I did not realise he so soon gave credit to anything I said. I would not blame him had he not. I treated him so terribly—misjudged and abused him. How could it not raise him in her estimation even further? I have even more reason to regret him now. Oh Lydia! Would you even care if you knew what your foolishness cost me?

She could not blame Lydia alone; she ought to have known better, but their parents had spoilt her and failed to correct her behaviour. Elizabeth had warned her father that he should not allow Lydia to go to Brighton with Colonel and Mrs Forster, yet he had ignored her.

And we all bear the cost—Lydia most especially, doomed to life with such a man.

When the gentlemen joined the ladies in the withdrawing room, they decided to play games. Miss Darcy was not the only young person in attendance—the vicar's children, aged seventeen and eighteen were also there, which Elizabeth thought made it more

pleasant for Miss Darcy. They played a rather rousing game of move-all. It led to a great deal of laughter, most of it brought on by the three Ledburys who excelled at cheating at it. Mr Ledbury admitted that it had been a favourite of theirs when they were children, and they developed a great deal of knowledge of the tricks to use to ensure victory. Elizabeth was breathless and her side ached by the time they decided they had had enough. The young people, joined by Miss Ledbury, her brother James, and Mr Bingley sat down to a game of commerce, while the others talked and otherwise amused themselves. Elizabeth remained close to Jane, not to keep her from Mr Bingley, but because her mood seemed subdued, especially each time she heard Mr Bingley's tenor voice showing how much fun he was having. Thomas appeared to be ignoring Jane, but without being overly obvious about it. Knowing about their argument, she supposed he was still angry.

Punishing her in such a way is not the best idea, Elizabeth reflected. It might only make her like Mr Bingley more.

The company left in time to arrive at their homes before midnight. At Blackthorn Manor, the family, their guests, and several servants gathered to usher out the old year and let the new one in. Elizabeth stood opposite Mr Darcy in the large circle they formed, and felt his eyes on her; it made her cheeks warm. She felt embarrassed, she might even say shy, which was unusual for her. Once the clock had chimed midnight, Elizabeth turned to Miss Darcy, at her right, embraced her, and wished her the best of good luck for the year ahead.

Miss Darcy said, "I hope...I hope you find a great deal of happiness."

Elizabeth smiled at her, then at Mr Darcy, who had come to stand beside his sister. As he bent to kiss Miss Darcy's cheek, Elizabeth turned to Jane, who had approached, and hugged her tightly.

Elizabeth whispered, "I pray that eighteen-fourteen will be a wonderful year for you, my dearest sister. You know I shall always do whatever I can to ensure it is."

"And I you, Lizzy."

Thomas joined them, kissing first Jane's, then Elizabeth's cheeks. "Well ladies, what do you think this year will bring us? Perhaps a husband for Lizzy?"

His chuckle told her that he was teasing, but with Mr Darcy

standing behind her, she wished he had held his tongue. She almost said, 'Or a baby for you and Jane,' but stopped herself in time. She suspected it would wound her sister.

Instead, she said, "I will settle for all of us, and the rest of our family, remaining healthy."

The next quarter of an hour was spent wishing everyone a happy new year. Miss Ledbury had her arm linked with Mr Bingley's, by whom she had stood at the turning of the years. Elizabeth thought it was bold of her, but her brothers were there to ensure propriety, and Mr Bingley was capable of finding a polite way to extricate himself if he wished. Her only regret was that it pained Jane; her delight was that it was Mr Bingley and not Mr Darcy.

As she lay in bed in the dark of her bedroom an hour later, Elizabeth wondered what the year would be like and where she would be to celebrate the end of it. Into the night, she murmured, "I have always been told that what happens on the first day of the year foretells what it will bring. Therefore, I will do one thing I know will bring me contentment; I shall write to Aunt Gardiner tomorrow and ask to stay with them. If I am fortunate, I shall be installed at Gracechurch Street by the end of the month, with no fixed date to return to Longbourn."

Mrs Bennet insisted on talking about her 'dear Mrs Wickham' and lamenting how far away she was settled. Saying goodbye to Mr Darcy would be difficult enough. Being constantly reminded of the sister whose actions had forever separated them would make it worse.



* * *

There was an almost languid air in the house the next day, except for Miss Ledbury, who, to Elizabeth, seemed almost frenetic. After breakfast, as everyone else wandered off to quiet activities such as reading or writing letters, Miss Ledbury begged Elizabeth's assistance.

"The ball is just a few days away, and there is so much to do!" Miss Ledbury said. "I wish Edward did not insist on hosting so many parties! He does not have to arrange them, and has no idea how much effort they require. You do not mind, do you, Miss Bennet? If you are tired or...?" She regarded Elizabeth with a questioning yet hopeful look.

"I do not mind at all. I would be happy to help."

Miss Ledbury sighed. "Oh, thank you. Let us start with the invitations."

Early in Elizabeth's stay at Blackthorn, she had assisted Miss Ledbury with preparing the elegant invitations she had sent out for the Twelfth Night ball. A steady number of replies had been received, and Elizabeth discovered that Miss Ledbury had ignored them in favour of enjoying her guests, which she interpreted as 'flirting with either Mr Darcy or Mr Bingley'. Now, they recorded the responses to have an estimate of how many people would attend. After that, Miss Ledbury wanted her opinion on the menu for the supper and decorations for the rooms.

"I do not know why I am so anxious about it," Miss Ledbury admitted. "I am not accustomed to making arrangements such as this, it is true, but I have assisted others often enough that I know I am not forgetting anything vital. I want it to be perfect."

"I am certain it will be lovely." Elizabeth continued recording the changes they had decided to make to the supper.

Miss Ledbury was quiet for a moment, and when Elizabeth glanced at her, she discovered that her hostess appeared wistful. Elizabeth waited until she shook her head and recalled herself to the conversation.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Bennet. I wandered away from you." She picked up a pencil and began to tap it against the edge of the walnut table at which they sat. "I was thinking about gentlemen. You know what I hope; I would like to be married. Edward would like me to find a husband, although at times I think it very unfair. He is ten years older than I am, and James six, and neither of them feel they must be married soon."

"It is different for ladies," agreed Elizabeth. "I have never heard anyone tell a gentleman that he is approaching the years of danger or that he will soon be on the shelf."

Miss Ledbury gave Elizabeth's hand a quick squeeze. "I am not even that old, but I have had two Seasons already, and I know that

the longer it takes, the less likely it is that I will attract a gentleman I would be happy to marry. The idea of having to settle for whomever will have me is..."

"Disagreeable." Elizabeth thought of her friend Charlotte, who had accepted the foolish Mr Collins in order to gain security and avoid being a burden on her parents and brothers. Would that be her fate in the end?

Miss Ledbury nodded. "The thing is...I quite like Mr Bingley." Her cheeks coloured, and she looked at her lap.

Elizabeth returned the pen to its holder and regarded her companion. A part of her was afraid she knew what Miss Ledbury wanted to ask, and she felt sick to her stomach. "Mr Bingley has always struck me as an amiable gentleman. He is very handsome, too, which I find is an essential quality in a man." She kept her tone light-hearted, hoping to avoid awkward questions.

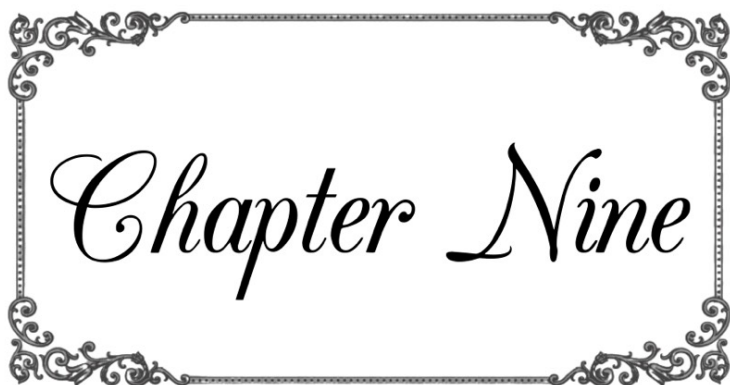
Miss Ledbury looked at her and nibbled her lip before asking, "I wonder if his heart is as free as it should be. You understand what I am asking. I would rather not, but I must know."

Repressing the urge to sigh, Elizabeth considered her options. She could pretend that she had no idea what Miss Ledbury meant or be offended at what she was suggesting. *Or I could respond in as delicate a manner as possible and in a way that does not betray Jane. If I were in Miss Ledbury's position, I, too, would want to know the truth. How I wish I understood what Mr Darcy thinks and feels! But it might also add to my sorrow, so perhaps it is better to remain ignorant.*

Aloud she said, "I know of no other attachment, but, as you may recall, I had not seen him in sixteen months before he and the Darcys arrived. Perhaps one of your brothers might have a word with him?"

Miss Ledbury was again nibbling her lip; she nodded and seemed to contemplate Elizabeth's suggestion. "I shall ask James. Edward is not always...discreet."

"What is next?" Elizabeth asked, returning them to their work. The two of them kept at it until luncheon, when they joined the others.



Chapter Nine

The best part of New Year's Day was going ice skating. There was a stretch of stream on Ledbury's estate that was shallow enough that it was frozen solid. When he suggested the scheme as they ate luncheon, Darcy's eyes had immediately sought Elizabeth. With the long, cold Derbyshire winters, he and Georgiana often went skating or sleigh riding, as they had done the previous week, and he wondered if Elizabeth enjoyed such activities. It seemed to him that she would; she always appeared to have an abundance of energy and liked to be outside. Sure enough, her voice was one of the first to agree.

"I shall not go," Miss Ledbury said. "My brothers will tell you how clumsy I am when I skate."

"Oh, but you must!" Bingley insisted.

Bingley spent a minute trying to convince her, but she insisted she would remain behind, attend to several household matters, then walk down to watch them. Darcy saw that his friend was torn between staying with the lady and his desire to participate in the activity. That was fair enough, and Darcy was glad that Bingley had learnt to appreciate Miss Ledbury's company. What he did not like

was seeing Bingley glance towards Mrs Ridley, especially after Mr Ridley said that he, too, would not go.

“I have letters I must write today. I ought to have done it already,” he said.

“Must you?” Mrs Ridley asked.

He nodded. “I will walk down later if you are not back before I am finished. You go on and enjoy yourself, my dear. Make sure Lizzy does not do anything too daring, such as challenge Ledbury or James to a race. I warn you, Lizzy, they are both excellent ice skaters.”

Elizabeth laughed and promised that she would behave. “I shall amuse myself and not risk being humiliated by those who must naturally be better at the sport than I am, if only because they are both so much larger than I am!”

Those who were going ice skating were soon changed into their warmest clothes, and, as a group, they walked down to the stream. The crunch of boots hitting the snowy path was accompanied by happy chatter. A clearing in the trees and brush that lined the stream gave them ready access to the frozen water. Willow branches hung low, and the sun glinted off the ice that weighed them down. Nearby logs, the snow brushed off them, provided places to sit and kept the scene charming and picturesque.

Darcy derived a great deal of pleasure from watching Elizabeth. She laughed, her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were rosy. At first, she stayed beside her sister, but soon after Ledbury joined them, she knelt down, as if adjusting the laces on her skates, and waved at them to go on without her. Darcy was with James Ledbury and Georgiana.

“It looks like Miss Bennet might require assistance. I shall—” James Ledbury said, but he was too late; Georgiana had already dropped Darcy’s arm to go to Elizabeth. Darcy felt his lips twitch upwards in satisfaction. Regardless of the man’s words the other day—that he did not see Elizabeth as a wife for him—Darcy still preferred to keep the two apart.

For the next while, the seven of them glided along the ice, often coming together and breaking into groups. Darcy enjoyed the fresh, crisp air and exercise; it left him feeling invigorated. He stopped and stood by the side to watch Elizabeth and Georgiana. Elizabeth was a very good ice skater. She twirled around with Georgiana, their hands clasped, both of them laughing, sending puffs of steam

up into the cold air.

Glancing at the others, he realised he missed an important change in pairings, as had Elizabeth. Bingley was with Mrs Ridley, her arm looped through his and their heads bent together. Mumbling something rude enough that he was glad no one heard him, he pushed away from the tree he had been leaning against and skated to them. His motion must have caught Elizabeth's attention, because no sooner had he caught up with Bingley and Mrs Ridley than she and Georgiana were there.

"Join us, Jane," Elizabeth cried. "Miss Darcy needs our advice about her gown for the ball."

She did not give her sister a chance to decline; she took her hand and pulled her away. At the same time, Darcy nudged Bingley in a new direction. Ledbury was with them a moment later, his brother lagging behind him. James Ledbury met Darcy's eye, glanced at Bingley, and cocked an eyebrow. Having no answers for him, Darcy ignored the unspoken question.

Neither Miss Ledbury nor Mr Ridley appeared before they decided to return to the warmth of the withdrawing room. Elizabeth and Mrs Ridley walked just ahead of Darcy and Georgiana, the path admitting no more than two people. Elizabeth spoke almost the whole way to the house, though in a tone too low for him to hear. Mrs Ridley listened and nodded but said little if anything at all.

There, they were greeted with hot beverages and tarts and cakes. Elizabeth sat with Mr and Mrs Ridley on a sofa. She must have said five or ten words for each one either of the Ridleys did, and Darcy wondered if Mr Ridley had—at last—noticed his wife's preference for another man.

The sooner Bingley and Mrs Ridley are separated, the better, and yet... The end of the house party would bring about another separation, one he both dreaded and anticipated so that he could, once again, try to find a way to live his life without Elizabeth Bennet in it.



* * *

The next day passed easily. Darcy was with the gentlemen most of the day, while the ladies amused themselves. Georgiana told him that she, Mrs Ridley, and Elizabeth were helping with arrangements for the Twelfth Night ball, which included a great deal of discussion about what they would wear. Georgiana found it all very exciting. Although she was not out, they had agreed that she would attend but not dance, unless it was with him or Bingley.

After spending some time outdoors after breakfast, they found indoor occupations, from billiards to discussions of estate management and politics, local and national. Throughout it all, Darcy made sure that Bingley remained with them and did not find an excuse to join the ladies. Darcy also felt a pull in that direction. His excuse was a desire to see that Georgiana was well, but she was with Elizabeth, who would ensure Georgiana's well-being and comfort. Darcy's secret wish was to spend as much time with Elizabeth as possible; he had long since abandoned his initial plan to avoid her. The day of their departure was looming over his head like an anvil, and, at moments, he was not sure how he would endure having to say goodbye to her. He picked at every word she said to him, analysed each look searching for clues that her opinion of him had changed enough to give him hope. At times, he was certain he saw it, but he knew it was just a matter of him seeing what he wanted.

Late in the afternoon, James Ledbury excused himself, saying he had work to do. "I am back to Leicester in a few days, but the law does not wait. If I do not attend to some of this now, I shall be working fourteen-hour days for a fortnight, which, I assure you, is not nearly as much fun as it sounds!"

Ledbury and Mr Ridley went off to do something too; Darcy did not catch what Ledbury said and did not think it important. He had not realised how close the two men were. *But why not? After all, do I not count Fitzwilliam as my closest friend?* He and Colonel Fitzwilliam

had been the best of friends since they were children.

Bingley suggested they play backgammon, and Darcy agreed.

"I played it with my father all the time," Bingley said. "It reminds me of him. Caroline used to play with me, until she decided it was not fashionable enough."

When Bingley laughed, Darcy was not sure why, but if it was at his sister's pretensions, he was in full accord.

"My grandfather taught me," Darcy said. "How long do the Hursts and Miss Bingley remain in the country?"

Bingley shrugged. "I imagine they will be in town by the middle of January. You know Caroline does not like to miss a day of London society. She is determined that this is the year she will find a husband." Bingley glanced at him and laughed again. "Do not fret, Darcy; she has given up hope that you will decide she is the perfect bride for you."

Darcy rolled his eyes.

Bingley chattered on. "I will never understand why young ladies are always so anxious about getting married. Oh, I know what you will say, so save your breath. Expectations, *et cetera*. They do not see that they make themselves less attractive by showing their desperation to the world. I suppose it does not help when they have parents or brothers who are rushing them to the altar. I never did that with my sisters. I would be very happy to see Caroline married, but I am not going to demand she accepts whichever man she can catch just to have her settled. It seems cruel. I know you would never treat Miss Darcy that way."

"I would not." If anything, he would discourage Georgiana from marrying unless she found a man she truly loved, who loved and valued her in return.

They played in silence for a few minutes, the only sound that of one or the other of them sipping their drink or the draughts hitting the board.

"Ledbury—the younger one—asked me about his sister," Bingley said. "I was not really sure what to say. Miss Ledbury is lovely. I suppose one could say she is everything a young lady ought to be. What do you think of her, Darcy?"

"She is very nice and would make the right man a fine wife."

Bingley contorted his features in a way that told Darcy he was thinking this over. A moment later, he sat back in his chair, the game forgotten. "Do you know, I would have thought it could be

me. Perhaps she is. She is just the sort of girl I like. Lively, pretty, not so clever that I risk feeling stupid next to her. I leave those ladies to you." He chuckled. "You will not be surprised when I say that seeing Mrs Ridley again has, well, confused me."

Added your wits, you mean. Darcy made a noise that could be taken as agreement or something less firm.

"I mean to say, I know you were right the other day. I was certain whatever I felt for her when we were in Hertfordshire was over. If I thought otherwise, I would have returned that spring or summer. A part of me thinks I was wrong not to."

"It is too late—" Darcy stopped speaking when Bingley nodded and waved a hand, brushing away the reminder.

"I know, I know. Any regrets I have should be kept to myself." He pulled his eyebrows together, making the tips of them stand up like a row of little spikes on his forehead. "I am not even convinced that I *do* regret her."

"Bingley, if you ever loved her—*genuinely* loved her—you would have returned, and you would not be questioning if you regretted not doing so. You find her attractive. It is understandable; she is a beautiful woman and has a sweet temper. But I do not believe your feelings have ever extended beyond that." *At least, I do not any longer—not since I first told you I was mistaken about her sentiments towards you.*

Bingley slowly nodded, picked up his glass of apricot wine—which Darcy found disgustingly sweet—and drained it. "I enjoy her company."

Darcy suppressed an urge to box Bingley's ears. "Be that as it may, do yourself, and especially Mrs Ridley, a favour and keep your distance. Do not go walking with her, do not sit next to her in the withdrawing room, do not ask her to dance at the ball. Treat her as the old acquaintance she is and as one who is married. As for Miss Ledbury, unless you are resolved against her, there is no harm in getting to know her better—as long as you are cautious with your behaviour so that you do not raise her or her brothers' expectations."

Darcy gave him a moment to consider his advice, then insisted they return to their game.



* * *

As the day drew to an end, Darcy sat with Elizabeth and Georgiana. The ladies had delighted the company—or at least him—with music, and he had escorted them to a sofa afterwards, intending to remain by Elizabeth's side as much as he could. The three of them spoke for a while; they said nothing beyond the ordinary, but it was agreeable and easy. Darcy neither knew nor cared what their companions did, so lost had he become in Elizabeth's fine eyes, lively conversation, and smiling countenance.

I shall pay for every moment of this pleasure in longing and melancholic reflections come the seventh, he told himself. Yet I would not willingly give up a single instant of it.

It was near midnight when Georgiana indicated she wished to retire. "It is getting quite late. I am afraid I am not used to such hours." She appeared almost embarrassed by her admission.

"There is no reason why you should be," Elizabeth said. "You will have time enough to stay up to see the dawn once you are out, but for my part, I prefer to greet the rising sun after a good night's sleep so that I might enjoy the peacefulness of the morning."

Darcy added, "I suspect the rest of us will soon retire too. Would you like me to escort you to your room?"

Georgiana looked appreciative, but shook her head. Darcy thought he saw her glance between him and Elizabeth, but the light was too dim to be certain. He prayed she was not hoping something would come from them seeing Elizabeth again. *If I had more sense, I would have removed us from Blackthorn as soon as I saw her. I did not think that she and Georgiana would become friends, and what that would do to Georgiana once we left.* And whatever he had told himself at the start of the visit, he had been drawn to Elizabeth and could not forego the opportunity to be with her once again.

"I shall see you in the morning," Elizabeth said to Georgiana. "Perhaps not until breakfast, however. I believe the weather will remain fair, and, as long as it is, I intend to take a long walk first

thing.” She laughed. “Even if I remained awake another three or four hours, which I assure you I will not, I will be up with the dawn. I shall take the road. I would rather trample through the park, but I will not, given the snow and ice.”

With a final good night, Georgiana left them. Just as Darcy had predicted would happen, other people began to retire, too, beginning with Mrs Ridley, whom Elizabeth joined. He remained in the withdrawing room for another ten or fifteen minutes, not attending to the conversation but rather staring at the door through which Elizabeth had lately disappeared. Had she meant her talk of walking in the morning—going so far as to say where she would be—as a hint? Was it an invitation? Did she wish him to join her? As much as he told himself that, of course, she did not, he knew that, as the sun rose, he would be outside, waiting for her.



Chapter Ten

As Elizabeth prepared for her walk the next morning, she felt a fluttering in her stomach and chastised herself. When she had talked about her intention of going out before breakfast the night before, she had wanted Mr Darcy to know, hoping he would join her.

I should not have done so, she thought as she checked her reflection in the mirror and tucked an errant strand of hair under her hat. But we will soon go our separate ways. Is it truly so wrong to want to enjoy his company while I can?

She was not imposing herself on him. He need not seek her out if he did not want to talk to her. She even assured herself that it would be better if he did not, and all her fussing over how she looked was nothing short of absurd.

Walking along the road leading away from the manor, she reprimanded herself for walking slower than her usual gait and sped up. There was no sign of Mr Darcy—not a sound that could have been anyone other than a servant when she was inside or so much as a faint crunch of boot on stone or snow that did not come from her once she was outside.

I would do better to look about me and appreciate the environs. I wish there were fewer clouds, but I estimate a third of the sky is blue, and I shall be satisfied with that. There is no wind, for which I am glad, because it would make the morning too cold to remain outside long. From an aesthetic viewpoint, Mr Ledbury ought to have more evergreen shrubs and trees; it would add interest to the winter landscape.

Rounding a bend in the road, she gave an audible gasp and jumped when she saw a tall figure standing and looking across a white-blanketed field.

Mr Darcy turned at the noise. "Miss Bennet, I have startled you; I beg your pardon."

Elizabeth rested a hand over her heart, which was racing, and did her best not to grin like a fool. "There is no need, sir. I was woolgathering."

She felt her cheeks heat as his eyes seemed to sweep over her, his lips forming a soft smile. He had come! Like her, he wanted to spend time together. While they could never be more than friends, they could at least have that for a few days longer. As she resumed walking, a smile was all the invitation she needed to offer for him to fall into step beside her. They said nothing for two or three minutes; Elizabeth was too pleased to see him, and she worried she would say too much.

Finally deciding his sister was a safe enough topic, she asked, "Is Miss Darcy finding her stay at Blackthorn agreeable? I understand she is trying to become more comfortable in company before her come out."

Mr Darcy had his hands clasped behind his back. His expression showed concern. "You might be better able to tell me. Georgiana does not find it easy to be with people she knows as little as she does the Ledburys. She says she is glad we came, is enjoying it, and that she is looking forward to the ball, but I am not convinced she would admit it if her feelings were the opposite. She does not want to displease me, which is generous of her, but how am I to know what to do for her if she hesitates to be frank with me?"

Elizabeth wished she had the right—or boldness—to rest a hand on his arm and offer him the comfort he evidently needed. "From what I have seen, she is doing very well, considering her shyness and youth. I believe you were right that this sort of party, where we are few, would be good experience for her."

He nodded, and a moment later said, "I know she takes great

pleasure in your company.”

Was she mistaken, or did his voice sound tentative? She could take it as proof that he meant to suggest that he, too, liked to spend time with her. *I shall take that knowledge and put it in my treasure box of memories. Despite all the reasons he should despise me, he does not. Oh Lydia, what you have cost me! What I cost myself by misjudging him.*

Aloud, Elizabeth said, “And I hers. She is a charming young lady, and you should be very proud of her.”

“I am.”

They fell silent until Elizabeth thought to ask where he and his sister would go next.

“Pemberley, at least until February or March,” he said. “Lady Romsley, Colonel Fitzwilliam’s mother, will want us to go to her in Worcestershire. She remains there until after Easter, although my uncle will be in town. I do not know if we shall, however. After that, we will be in London. Have you decided if you will remain with the Ridleys?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I do not intend to. It would do them good to be alone. I should say, without me. They are hardly alone, living in the same house with Thomas’s parents, but I understand they go to see friends in Devon or Cornwall.”

“Bingley goes directly to town.”

Their eyes met, and Elizabeth offered him a quick smile; they would both be pleased to know Mr Bingley and Jane were no longer together.

After another brief silence, they spoke of easier matters—what Leicestershire was like when it was not winter, how much they both liked the spring but preferred the autumn, and books and art. They wandered for longer than they should have, given the weather, but she said she was warm enough the several times he enquired about her comfort. In truth, she simply did not wish to end their time together sooner than necessary. She had him to herself—no one to interfere, no distractions for either one of them—and she wanted to take advantage of every possible minute.

At length, they knew they had to return to the house to join the others before their absence was remarked upon. They said no words of parting, but they did exchange a look that provided Elizabeth with yet another moment she would store away like a squirrel did nuts to pull out when it was most needed.



* * *

Elizabeth was already at the breakfast table when Mr Darcy entered the room.

“Darcy, there you are,” Mr Ledbury cried. “I was looking for you earlier.”

“Oh?” Mr Darcy looked unconcerned and said nothing further as he went to the sideboard.

Although Elizabeth tried not to show that she was attending to the conversation, she could not stop her eyes from darting towards him. She caught a glimpse of Miss Darcy looking between her and her brother, a pleased smile on her face. Elizabeth felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. Miss Darcy guessed she and Mr Darcy had been together. Elizabeth’s behaviour had raised hopes that, when they did not come to pass, might injure the young lady, and she was ashamed of herself.

I will have to be more cautious. Surely, I can resist temptation for the next few days—for her sake, if not my own.

Forcing her thoughts away from Mr Darcy, Elizabeth gave her attention to what Mr Bingley, who sat beside her, was discussing with James Ledbury, who was across from him. She had the satisfaction of seeing Jane and Thomas in quiet conversation. Elizabeth caught Jane’s eye and offered her a smile, which Jane returned. The previous afternoon, she had told Elizabeth that she had been right to caution her about her behaviour towards Mr Bingley.

Jane had said, “It was pleasant to... Well, it was a diversion, but it is over. I promise, Lizzy. Thomas is my husband, and I must make the best of it.”

Elizabeth had clasped her hand and insisted, “You and he *can* be happy. He is a good man and loves you. Show him that your loyalty is to him.”

Since then, Elizabeth had seen that Jane was doing her best to avoid Mr Bingley while remaining polite. She prayed that it

continued and that, once in Northampton again, Jane and Thomas's relationship would improve.

As for me, I shall go to Gracechurch Street.

The Gardiners had never spoken to her about Mr Darcy. Intelligent and sympathetic as they were, they must have seen that she loved him. Elizabeth had told them enough so that they knew the connexion between Mr Darcy and Wickham had been severed long ago because of Wickham's dissolute habits. They were wise enough to realise that, while a man like Mr Darcy might decide to throw aside all expectations to marry the penniless daughter of a country gentleman whose relations were in trade, making himself brother-in-law to a man like Wickham was asking too much.

When I tell them Mr and Miss Darcy were here, they will understand my distress and provide me with the sanctuary I need until I can be myself again. I can ask no more of anyone.



* * *

Before retiring on the night of the fourth, Miss Ledbury suggested they visit Halfton, the nearest market town, the following day. It would allow them to escape the final push of preparations at Blackthorn Manor for the ball as the servants rushed around, cleaning and rearranging furniture. Everyone had been agreeable to the outing, and they set off after breakfast.

Elizabeth shared a carriage with Miss Ledbury, Mr Ledbury, and Mr Bingley. Since Miss Ledbury devoted herself to Mr Bingley, who appeared a willing recipient of her attention, that left Elizabeth and Mr Ledbury to talk or not, and it was soon apparent that Mr Ledbury preferred to remain silent. Elizabeth watched the landscape as they drove the four miles between Blackthorn and the market town. They passed fields, one of which housed a flock of sheep, huddled together against the wind, or simply because they preferred it, and several well-tended cottages with plumes of smoke rising from their chimneys. The day was grey, but—according to Mr

Ledbury's gardener—it was not likely to snow.

Halfton reminded Elizabeth of Meryton, which itself was like many other small towns she had seen on her travels.

And I am such a fool that I continue to think of Lambton as the most pleasant of them all. Why? Because it is close to Pemberley, and I have such fond memories of seeing Mr Darcy there. There were the times he called on her, the morning he and his sister collected her in an open carriage to take her on a tour of the neighbourhood, when they had walked together through the town, Mr and Mrs Gardiner behind them. She had felt so proud that afternoon, being by his side, watching him doff his hat when he was greeted by various townsfolk. The entire time, as they looked in shop windows or as he explained the significance of a building or statue, she had been suffused with warmth, excited to imagine that soon she would walk the same streets as his wife.

Today, let me stop my memories there and not remember what followed the next day.

The carriage came to a stop, which was the signal for Miss Ledbury to recall that she was not alone with Mr Bingley.

"You are very dull this morning, Edward," she said as she adjusted her velvet bonnet and tugged at her gloves. "I do not believe you said a single word to Miss Bennet the entire ride. Miss Bennet, I apologise for my brother."

But not for yourself? You, too, ignored me. It had not disturbed her; Miss Ledbury was taking every possible opportunity to know Mr Bingley better, which is what she ought to do, especially since Mr Bingley did not seem to object.

Mr Ledbury murmured an apology. "My mind is elsewhere, I am afraid."

Elizabeth smiled at her hostess and offered the same gesture to both gentlemen. "My eyes feasted on everything we passed, and I was well amused, I assure you."

"Nevertheless, I will ensure you have better company for the return journey. Now, let us enjoy what Halfton has to offer, shall we? A bit of shopping followed by refreshments at the inn."

They exited the carriage and joined the remainder of their party to discuss their plans. It was decided that the gentlemen, save Thomas, would visit the blacksmith's. Mr Ledbury claimed the man had invented a new tool he wished to show Mr Darcy, and his brother and Mr Bingley decided to go with them. Thomas would

escort the ladies to the shop selling sundries, then wherever they wished to go. If they did not see each other first, the two groups would meet at the inn in an hour.

The shop was a more than adequate representative of its sort. The interior decoration was wisely light in colour—the walls and drapes and shelves all a pale cream and the window sufficiently large to let in an adequate amount of sunlight even on a cloudy day—and the proprietors stocked an interesting array of goods. Thomas attended Jane and Miss Ledbury, and Elizabeth went with Miss Darcy to look at ribbons. Miss Darcy hoped to find a purple one to go with the gown she intended to wear to the ball.

“I know I cannot dance, and I would not want to stand up with any gentleman I did not know,” Miss Darcy said. “I would be too embarrassed. I shall have to eventually, but for now, I am happy to dance with my brother and then watch.”

“I am sure you will have company as you sit out. Your brother, I know, is not fond of dancing, and, as unknown as I am here, I do not expect to have partners all night long.”

Miss Darcy gave her a fleeting, sly look. “I believe Fitzwilliam likes to dance well enough when he has a partner he finds particularly agreeable. He will ask you for a set, I am certain of it.”

Elizabeth smiled but said nothing. She did not want to encourage Miss Darcy to think her brother had any intentions towards her.

“He is the best of brothers,” Miss Darcy continued a moment later. “So kind and patient with me. Lady Catherine tells me I am too old to still be so shy and that I ought to be anxious to come out and find a husband so that Fitzwilliam is no longer burdened with my care.”

Elizabeth’s fist tightened around a piece of lace she had picked up to examine. She longed to ask Lady Catherine if she felt burdened by having an unmarried daughter who was far older than Miss Darcy. “I apologise in advance for my rudeness, Miss Darcy, but that was a terrible thing for her to say to you. Not even the smallest part of me believes your brother views your situation in such a way. Neither do I believe he blames you for being shy. If anything, he would wish to make you comfortable in society, which—aside from any consideration of marriage—would be to your benefit. It would allow you to make more friends, find it easier to undertake charitable works and the like, and, yes, enjoy yourself at

balls and other parties.”

Miss Darcy gave her such a fond look that Elizabeth felt a crack form in her heart. It was bad enough that she continued to love Mr Darcy; now, she was in very real danger of loving his sister, if she did not already.

Miss Darcy repeated, “He is the best of brothers, the best of men. He has been very happy to see you again, as have I.”

Scrambling for words, Elizabeth said, “I have been happy to see you too. These last two weeks have gone by very quickly. Just a few more days, and I go south while, if I understand correctly, you go north.” She attempted cheerfulness, but gave it up as expecting too much from herself. When she saw a hint of lavender-coloured silk, she said, “Oh, I think I see just the thing for you.”

With relief, Elizabeth was able to turn Miss Darcy’s attention back to searching for ribbons. Before anything further could be said about Mr Darcy, she caught Jane’s eye and sent her an imploring look. Jane joined them, and, after Miss Darcy found what she was looking for, they concluded their business and went on to explore Halfton’s other shops.



Chapter Eleven

Darcy surveyed his reflection in the standing mirror in his bedchamber. Having just dismissed his valet, he was alone.

It was, at last and too soon, Twelfth Night, the culmination of Yuletide celebrations. He, Georgiana, and the other guests had joined the Ledburys and their servants in clearing the house of all the festive decorations earlier in the day. Now, he was dressed for the ball. Running a hand over his freshly shaven jaw, he was exceedingly glad Ledbury had forbidden his sister from arranging a masquerade or anything more elaborate than the usual private country dance. Miss Ledbury had spent the past day rushing about in an effort to make sure everything was, in her words, 'perfect'. To his mind, the lady was worrying about it far more than it deserved.

Perhaps she is that sort of person who is never happy unless there is something to cause them anxiety. His less-charitable thought was that Miss Ledbury wished to show Bingley what an excellent wife she would be by demonstrating her ability to resolve last minute complications. *If that is so, she might wish to adopt a calmer manner!*

He sighed and scowled, knowing he was not being fair. Miss Ledbury was an agreeable young woman, and he would not be

disappointed if she and Bingley formed an attachment.

“Well, old man,” he muttered, “do you intend to stand here in this stupid manner, or will you do as you ought and find Georgiana and join the Ledburys? Twelve hours or thereabouts and we will be gone, away from Blackthorn, Christmastide behind us.”

Elizabeth behind us. No more clandestine morning walks, no more sitting with her and Georgiana in the evenings, imagining the three of us are at Pemberley, no more hearing her laugh or seeing her smile.

With another sigh, he tugged at his waistcoat, turned away from his reflection, and headed for the door.



* * *

Miss Ledbury’s arrangements were all very elegant and would not have looked out of place in town. Darcy thought the company was good too. He saw a few acquaintances, apart from those he had met over the last fortnight, and expected to be as pleased with the ball as he usually was with such affairs. That, at least, was his thought leading up to the start of the dancing. He had not asked any lady for the first set. The only one he wanted to stand up with was Elizabeth, but he would not make her uncomfortable by singling her out in such a fashion. He and Georgiana would dance the second or third set, and he would ask Miss Ledbury later in the evening.

As he and Georgiana stood with an older couple who knew their uncle, Lord Romsley, Darcy silently debated the wisdom of asking Elizabeth to dance at all. He wanted to; there was no doubt about it. But would he be able to stand across from her for half an hour or so, knowing this was the last evening they would have together and not embarrass himself by showing his feelings for the entire world to see? His eyes sought her out, soon finding her across the room. She stood with Mr Bingley, Miss Ledbury, and two young men Darcy did not know. It felt like someone squeezed his heart, to see how beautiful she looked. The rich blue fabric of her gown

shimmered, and she wore pink flowers in her hair. Even from this distance, he was certain he could see the dusting of colour on her cheeks, and he almost felt himself inching nearer to her, ostensibly to see if the blooms had a pleasant scent, but truly just wishing to be as close to her as politeness allowed. He could feel the weight of her hand resting in his as he led her to the dance floor or to search for their friends or refreshments. She would turn her dark eyes on him, her soft lips upturned in a smile that was just for him.

Georgiana's voice recalled him to his companions. "I-I-I do not know. Brother?"

It took a moment to understand what they had been discussing and to give a reasonable response. After that, Darcy excused himself and his sister, and they went in search of something to drink.

A short while later, Ledbury caught up to them. Georgiana was talking with a lady they had met during their stay at Blackthorn—rather, she was listening to the woman talk—when Ledbury clapped him on the shoulder.

"Enjoying yourself, Darcy? Well, as much as you can. I know this sort of thing is not how you would choose to spend your time, as much as they are expected of us."

"Miss Ledbury has done an admirable job."

Ledbury nodded. "That she did. I think she started planning it the moment we decided to spend the Festive Season in the country. I wanted to thank you for coming and bringing Miss Darcy and Bingley. We have been a small party, but sometimes that is best, eh? I do not think it has been too tedious."

"Not at all. I know I speak for Georgiana as well when I say we have had a pleasant time."

"It helps that you were already acquainted with my cousin's wife and sister-in-law."

Darcy made a noise of agreement. The men looked over the crowd and remained silent for a minute until James Ledbury joined them. He wore a bright red waistcoat that would have given Darcy's valet an apoplexy. Darcy's dislike of it had nothing to do with having seen the man dancing with Elizabeth.

After saying the usual things about the ball, James Ledbury said, "Your friend is doing the pretty with Harriet tonight. I hope he knows what he is about."

Darcy lifted one shoulder and forced himself not to scowl. He was reminded of another ball at which he had danced with

Elizabeth—and Bingley's behaviour towards another young lady that evening.

Ledbury said, "Stop fretting about Harriet. She wants a husband, and, in pursuing gentlemen with that goal in mind, she has to expect to face disappointment now and again."

James Ledbury stepped closer to his brother, and they began a hissed debate about how to manage their sister's life. Darcy tried not to listen, and was relieved when the lady with Georgiana excused herself and he and Georgiana could politely leave them to it.

"You should dance, Brother," Georgiana said.

"I shall ask Miss Ledbury later."

She bit her lips together before saying, "Will you not ask Miss Bennet for a set?"

Darcy looked beyond her, his eyes unseeing. The sound of the music, people chatting, and shoes hitting the wooden floor roared in his ears. He took in a deep breath and exhaled. "I do not know. I am glad you like her, Georgiana, but—" He gave a slight head shake.

Georgiana hung her head, visibly disappointed. Darcy knew she did not understand, but how could he explain everything that had happened with Elizabeth to his seventeen-year-old sister? Even Fitzwilliam did not know all of it.

"Come," he said, "let us find a waiter, one who has more of those little cakes. What do you say?"

Georgiana nodded and did her best to smile. He held out an arm to her, and, once her hand was wrapped around it, led her to another part of the ballroom.



* * *

Elizabeth curtsied and smiled at her dance partner, a gentleman she had met early in her stay at Blackthorn Manor. He escorted her to Jane, and offered to get her something to drink, which she

declined. He was pleasant enough company, but she was not sorry when he excused himself.

“Did you enjoy the dance?” asked Jane.

Elizabeth nodded. “And you? How did you pass the time?”

“I spoke to several ladies. Thomas was with me, but he remembered something he needed to ask Mr Ledbury. It is a lovely ball.”

Jane looked wistful, and Elizabeth would not be surprised to learn that she was not sleeping well. There was a heaviness to her features, and she held herself too tightly.

Elizabeth said, “Are you looking forward to leaving tomorrow?”

Jane nodded. “I am. Are you determined to spend the winter with Aunt and Uncle Gardiner? You know I would gladly keep you with me.”

Elizabeth squeezed her sister’s hand. “I know, and I am. I think it best if you and Thomas have some time alone. But, Jane, I shall go to Northampton in an instant if you write and tell me you need me. Perhaps the two of you will go to town for a while, and we shall see each other there.”

Again, Jane nodded. “I know you are right, Lizzy, but I will miss you.”

“And I you. Let us not become maudlin; a ballroom is no place for such emotions.”

Jane offered a tremulous smile and nodded. “Tell me who else you have stood up with. Has Mr Darcy asked you for a set?”

Elizabeth felt herself become pale and tears formed behind her eyes. She had been doing her best not to think about Mr Darcy all evening and wished Jane had not chosen this moment to ask about him, something she had not done once over the last fortnight. “I do not expect him to. You must recall that he is not fond of the activity.”

Jane regarded her for a long moment. “Why do I think you have not told me everything about your connexion to Mr Darcy? I may have been...overly consumed with other matters of late, but I have the impression—”

Elizabeth interjected, “Let us speak of something else. It will be supper soon. I hope Miss Ledbury is satisfied with it. She was so anxious about the menu yesterday.”

With an air of reluctance, Jane followed her lead, and the conversation was suitably bland for the next little while. They spoke

to several other guests and were still together when Thomas returned to escort them into supper.



* * *

After supper, Elizabeth sat with Miss Darcy for a half an hour while Mr Darcy danced with Miss Ledbury. Miss Darcy claimed to be enjoying herself, but her spirits seemed a little depressed. Jane found them as the set was finished, and Elizabeth slipped away when she saw Mr Darcy's tall form approaching them.

She was startled when, as the interlude was ending, he found her and asked her to dance. He looked grave, and Elizabeth could not tell if he most wished she would accept or decline. All she could do was nod. She had spent the evening avoiding him, yet she could not deny that she wanted to be near him. Each time she looked across from her as the music played and she moved through the well-known steps of this or that dance, she had wished it was Mr Darcy, and not whichever gentleman was her partner, even when it was Thomas.

They took their places. Elizabeth straightened her spine and regarded him. He was always handsome. Even the night they had met at that long ago assembly in Meryton, she had been struck by his looks. Tonight, standing across from him, she wanted to drink in everything about him, etch his image into her memory, remember every detail—the way his neckcloth draped, how the light reflected off the silver thread in his waistcoat, the rich scent of his cologne.

They did not speak. Elizabeth was not sure she could force sound out of her mouth, even had she known what to say. Instead, they looked at each other. She was incapable of turning her eyes away from him, and it seemed that the same was true for him. As the dance continued and she somehow completed the movements without conscious thought, her heart grew heavier and more brittle until she could almost feel it shattering into tiny shards. Tomorrow, they would be separated.

I may never see him again. I cannot see him again, whatever I must do to ensure it happens. It hurts too much, especially to see him look at me like this, as if he regrets—

There was a softness in his eyes, a gentle pressure as his fingers closed around hers, the straight line his lips formed that suggested they were tightly pressed together, how his chin turned to follow her even when the dance separated them as if he could not bear to lose sight of her.

Mixed with her pain, Elizabeth felt a stab of anger. It was not fair of him to act as though he still cared for her. Somehow, she managed to make it through the dance, but with each step it became harder and harder. She felt tears pooling behind her eyes, and her chest rose and fell, her breaths shallow, until she was lightheaded. As soon as the last note struck, and without the usual curtsy, she spun around and walked away from him, desperate for a moment of privacy to regain her equanimity before she embarrassed herself. She did not care where she went—as long as it was far away from Mr Darcy.



* * *

Elizabeth's feet led her to the breakfast parlour, which she knew would be empty. It was cold, but she did not care. If anything, it would help to cool her emotions. Standing at the window, she watched the still, dark night. The faint noises of the ball reached her ears. A tear fell down her cheek; she brushed it away and sniffed.

Footsteps sounded behind her, followed by a deep voice saying, "Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth shook her head and pressed her eyes closed. "Please go away." Her voice sounded rough.

When he murmured, "Elizabeth," it felt like she was being pulled towards him, and another flash of anger surged through her gut, causing another tear to escape her eyes.

She spun around to face him. "How-how dare you? Do you have any idea what it is like for me to see you?"

Mr Darcy's brow furrowed as he stared back at her. "What it is like for *you*?"

"You made your choice, and I understand it. After Lydia's disgrace, with Wickham of all men, how could you—? I knew it was impossible. But to see you, to have you look at me that way."

His mouth was agape, the crease in his forehead deepening. "The choice *I* made? But..." He stepped towards her but remained six feet away. "*You* were the one who—I wrote to your father, but you—he—"

The blood rushed out of her cheeks and pooled in her stomach. For a moment, it seemed as if time stopped. When her mind managed to grasp the edge of what his words suggested, she demanded, "What? When? Why? Wh-what did you say to him?"

Mr Darcy took one more step towards her, his features mirroring the confusion she felt. "That autumn. I apologised for not doing more about Wickham sooner, and said that I was relieved everything had worked out as well as one could hope, under the circumstances. I told him that we had seen each other in Derbyshire, that if you, and he, would permit it, I would very much like to continue the acquaintance."

Elizabeth produced a sound that was part gasp, part sob. He had written? He had wanted to see her again?

Cautiously, as though he was afraid of her response, he asked, "You did not know?"

Elizabeth shook her head, and another tear or two fell down her face. She wiped them away. "You sent a letter to my father? You wanted to see me?" She had to be sure she understood; misunderstanding could be disastrous.

He nodded.

She closed her eyes for a minute and tried to dampen the near fury she felt as she understood what must have happened. When she was capable of speaking, she met his eyes. "It is likely still on his desk unread. Or, if he did open it, he thought it was a great joke, one he no doubt meant to share with me, but he forgot." She repeated, "You wanted to see me again?" Her voice quivered, and she knew she was close to losing control and sobbing.

Mr Darcy nodded again and took a small step closer. "I am almost afraid to ask. What would you have said had you known? Is

it too late? Have I let my doubts and self-recriminations ruin my chances of ever having what I most want, what I dream of every day and night?"

Elizabeth's heart ached so much that she wanted to clench her chest. She could only shake her head and mouth the word 'no'. It was enough. He took another step in her direction, which left him close enough to claim her hand, though he did not.

"Will you—?" He stopped and swallowed. "C-could you possibly see your way to accepting me, to being my wife? Elizabeth, I...I do not have the words to tell you how dear you are to me, how ardently I love you."

As soon as the last three words were out of his mouth, she clasped his hand. A bubble of joy, all the greater in size for following so much despair, rose from her toes and through her body until it escaped as a laugh and grin. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. I love yo—"

He cut off her words with the most fervent of kisses.



Chapter Twelve

Darcy could not believe it. If he were not standing mere inches from Elizabeth, her hands in his, he would not. When they had been dancing, he could not stop himself from staring at her, his thoughts turning dark and brooding as he imagined having to say a polite adieu to her the next morning, hiding his affection and pretending it meant nothing to climb into his carriage and drive away from her. When she left him so unceremoniously, he had to follow. And then... Then everything had changed.

He pressed his lips to hers again, their kiss gentle, and rested his forehead against hers.

"I am afraid I am dreaming, as I have so often these last sixteen months," he whispered.

"Then I am as well, and I have never heard of two people sharing the same dream. The conclusion, my dear, dear Mr Darcy, is that this is reality." Like him, her words were soft, as was the laugh that followed.

"There is so much I must say to you, that we must discuss. I cannot bear the thought of sharing you with anyone else, not just yet."

She tightened her grip on his hands and smiled. When she suggested they stay where they were a little longer to give themselves the opportunity to talk, he agreed. First, he would go to the ballroom to check on Georgiana. Very likely, she had noticed his absence and was worried. Before he left, he lit several candles.

He was as quick as he could be about his errand and brought Elizabeth a thick shawl when he returned.

“Oh, thank you.” She wrapped it around her shoulders.

Darcy led her to a chair and sat across from her, claiming her hands, which were cold. “Georgiana fetched it. I told her we needed to talk, that there had been some miscommunication between us.”

Elizabeth, his dearest, beloved Elizabeth, laughed, and he rejoiced in the sound.

“That is an understatement.” Glancing at the shawl, she continued, “I must conclude this is hers.”

He nodded. “She has retired to her room. I walked her to it, and, when I told her where we were, she thought you would need it.”

“She is such a lovely girl. I am already so fond of her. Indeed, the other day, I realised that I was growing to love her, which would only add to my heartbreak when we parted.”

Darcy drew her hands to his mouth and kissed them. “Although I am a selfish being and want to marry you because I know it will bring me such joy, I have long known that you would make the most excellent sister for Georgiana.”

They were silent for a moment. Darcy gazed at her, the flicker of the candlelight creating an intimate, calm atmosphere. Her lips formed a smile, and he had to restrain himself from kissing her again.

He said, “You can have no idea how many times I wished your letters from Longbourn had been delayed a day or two longer, just enough time for me to have found the courage to ask you to give me a chance to prove I was worthy of you.”

“You did not need to. I had already decided that you were the best of men.” In the teasing tone he adored, she added, “And the only man in the world I could ever marry.”

He chuckled at the allusion to her rejection of him at Hunsford. It had been the worst day of his life, one marked by pain and humiliation, but now, having been assured of her love and desire to be his, it mattered not. Nevertheless, he felt his cheeks heat; he doubted he would ever not feel embarrassed by the dreadful

showing he had made that day.

“I had hoped your feelings for me had improved. Those days in Derbyshire...” How could he possibly explain how wonderful they had been and how much they had meant to him.

“Oh yes, those days.” Her voice was warm and rich with feeling. “I have held them in my heart as the happiest of my life. Until now.”

Again, Darcy kissed her hands. He would rather kiss her lips, but—between the darkness, their solitude, and the relief of knowing his loneliness and heartache were at an end—did not trust himself. “We will have many more. I promise you that, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth.”

“And I vow to do everything in my power to help you keep that promise. I will see you as happy as I know you will make me.” She tightened her grip on his hands for a moment before saying, “I have to know. Why did you not just come to Hertfordshire? Why write to my father instead?”

Darcy sighed and dropped his eyes to their joined hands. “In part, it was because, with Bingley having no wish to return to Netherfield, I had no easy excuse to be there. I might have overcome that, but I was certain you blamed me for your sister’s marriage to Wickham and Bingley’s failure to pursue Mrs Ridley. If I had explained some part of my past with Wickham, if I had not thought it beneath me to do so, if I had insisted Bingley go to Hertfordshire that spring or not waited so long to tell him everything— You would have been right to hate me for either. Together...” He shrugged.

“I never blamed you! Lydia, Wickham, and my parents alone are responsible. I believed you could not bear the thought of being connected to him. How could you, after how he treated you and Miss Darcy? As for Mr Bingley! If he could so easily forget Jane, then he was not the husband I would want for her. After how he has behaved here—and I do not excuse my sister’s part in it—I know he is not. Had they gotten married, who is to say that he would not flirt with other ladies? That would have hurt her far more than his never returning to Netherfield.”

In fairness to Bingley, who he considered a dear friend, he said, “I trust that, once he decides to marry, he will treat his wife as he ought. Despite his faults, he is a good man.”

Elizabeth accepted his words with a nod. “But I do not want to

talk about him or Jane or anyone else.”

Darcy agreed, and, knowing they should not remain alone much longer, insisted they agree on their plans. They decided that he and Georgiana would accompany Elizabeth and the Ridleys to Northampton. From there, the three of them—Elizabeth, Georgiana, and he—would go on to Longbourn so that he could ask Mr Bennet’s consent in person. At that time, they would choose a wedding date. Neither of them wanted a long betrothal.

“We have been separated long enough,” she said. “Sixteen months! I cannot agree to any unnecessary delay.”

“I would be a fool to want anything else, not when I have wanted you to be my wife for almost two years already. Now, my love, I am afraid we should return to the ballroom. I would be surprised if we have not been missed already.”

Her shoulders slumped, and she sighed. “I know you are correct, but I had much rather remain here with you. I have not felt so happy or peaceful in”—she chuckled—“sixteen months, I suppose.”

He ran his thumbs over the smooth surface of her cheeks to brush away the remnants of her tears, then leant forward and kissed her before standing and pulling her to her feet. “Let us scandalise those who have nothing better to do than watch how others are behaving. We shall dance together again and not hide our smiles or laughs. I do not care if they see how happy, how overjoyed I am, and gossip about it to the world. I want to shout out the news.”

Elizabeth laughed. “This is a new aspect to you, sir, and one of which I approve. We *are* happy. What care we for those who would seek to dampen our pleasure in this moment, one we deserve after so long? Those who love us will share in our joy. That is enough for me.”

“And for me. When I left Kent—oh, how long ago that seems—I despaired. I never expected to see you again. Then you were there, in Derbyshire, at Pemberley. I cannot possibly describe what I felt to see you. No sooner had I assured myself that I expected nothing more than to show you that I had listened to your reproofs, that I was a better man than you had first known, then I began to have other hopes. It seemed that you would give me a second chance, and I knew I was the most fortunate man in the world. When you received word about your sister... It felt like my world collapsed all around me, not at first, perhaps, but as the weeks passed and I received no reply to my letter. Again, I never expected to see you

again. For over a year now, I have tried to convince myself to put aside my love for you, the dreams I had of what our future could be. To find you here, in Leicestershire, staying in the same house? It seemed...unfair. Why must I be tortured in such a way? Were my sins so great?"

His hand was clasped between hers, and she held it to her chest. "Never! But none of that matters now. We have the future, *our* future to look forward to. In time, the pain of the past will be just that—the past." She smiled in just such a way that guaranteed he would give her anything she wanted. "Now, you promised me a dance, one in which we will throw caution to the wind and show everyone that we are the happiest couple in the world."

Her hand still in his, he extinguished the candles, dropped Georgiana's wrap on a chair, and led Elizabeth into their new life.



* * *

December 1814, Derbyshire

Darcy lifted the sleeping infant from Elizabeth's arms, placed a gentle kiss on his head, and took a moment to gaze at his precious, tiny features, now relaxed in sleep. At almost three weeks old, Alexander's skin was no longer mottled red, and he appeared more aware when he was awake, watching his parents and Aunt Georgiana sing and coo over him. Darcy handed his son to the nurse and hoped he would sleep for four, perhaps even five, hours. It would give Elizabeth a chance to rest. She insisted on feeding Alexander herself, at least until he was a little older. Darcy helped her out of the armchair she liked to use when she nursed their son and to the sofa where they could sit together. He draped a blanket on her lap and held her in his arms.

Elizabeth and Darcy had married in the middle of February. It had been a surprise to discover not two months later that they would be parents by the end of the year, but both had been

delighted. They had lost enough time together. The Bennets had been surprised when Darcy and Georgiana had escorted Elizabeth to Longbourn after her time at Blackthorn Manor, and Mr Bennet had arched his eyebrows high on his forehead when Darcy sought his permission to marry Elizabeth. The resulting silence had stretched into what seemed like a quarter of an hour but was likely no more than half a minute.

After Darcy had told Elizabeth about her father's shock and disbelief, her features had hardened, and, despite his assurance that everything was well, she had gone into Mr Bennet's book room and demanded to know what had become of the letter Darcy had sent him in the autumn of 1812. Elizabeth had eventually discovered it, and several other unopened letters, buried beneath a stack of books and papers. It had not occurred to Darcy that she would have questions about it after she read it, but she did.

"I was struck by the date most of all," she had said. "You had very early knowledge of Lydia's marriage. How?"

He had had no choice but to confess what he had done. They were sitting in a small back parlour at Longbourn, and he kept his voice low, hoping that no one would overhear. "I went to town the day after you and the Gardiners left Lambton. I believed I had the best chance of finding them, being more familiar with Wickham's habits than I ever wished to be. I soon discovered them. Your sister would not leave him, as had been my initial hope, so I did the only other thing I could. I arranged their marriage. There, too, I failed. I intended to escort Mrs Wick—"

"Oh, please call her Lydia," Elizabeth had cried. "I hate to hear that name."

"Very well. I intended to escort Lydia to the Gardiners to await the wedding, but she refused and would not listen to anything I said. Had I presented myself better when I was at Netherfield— But you will say that is in the past. I saw her established apart from Wickham and sent a maid to stay with her and kept a guard on him to ensure the event went off as required."

"Why did you never tell the Gardiners or me, at least?"

"I did not want you beholden to me. I might have, had I received a reply to my letter."

She had thanked him and, when he asked, promised not to tell anyone. "I am astonished Lydia managed to keep the secret, but when they came to Longbourn, she was so full of her triumph at

being the first of us to marry. I suppose she had already forgotten or chose not to remember that she owed her happiness to you.”

Immediately after their wedding, Elizabeth and Darcy had returned to Pemberley with no intention of leaving anytime soon. The Gardiners had come to them in the summer, bringing their four children, and some of Darcy’s family had visited in the autumn. The Riddles, Mr Bennet, and Elizabeth’s sister Mary were joining them the next day for the Festive Season and to meet the newest Darcy. Mrs Bennet had decided the trip was too long, and she and Miss Catherine had elected to remain at Longbourn. From what Elizabeth had told him, they were angry with her because she had vowed that the Wickhams would never be admitted to her or Darcy’s company either in town or Derbyshire. Mrs Bennet had often spoken of her youngest daughter in Darcy’s hearing. She assumed that ‘dearest Lydia’ would be invited to the wedding and began to hint about Darcy sending the Wickhams money to make the trip or—even better—sending one of his carriages for them. After one particularly unpleasant dinner, which had left Georgiana greatly distressed, Elizabeth had talked to her mother about it, and their relationship had yet to fully recover from the ensuing argument.

Darcy kissed Elizabeth’s temple, and she sighed as she nestled closer to him, her head on his shoulder.

He said, “Do you realise, it was one year ago tomorrow that Georgiana, Bingley, and I arrived at Blackthorn Manor?”

Her voice was heavy with fatigue. “Mm. I was so confused and miserable to see you again. And elated. I wanted to rush into your arms.” He chuckled, and she continued. “I think, seeing you, I felt that, finally, I was no longer alone. Yet, at the same time, I felt even more alone, more conscious of everything I had lost.”

Again, Darcy kissed her, his lips falling on her hair, which smelled of rosemary. “I believe I understand. I told myself I should stay away from you, yet I encouraged Georgiana to seek your company. With each day that passed, my resolve weakened. I wanted to be near you, however little time we had before we went our separate ways again.”

She made a noise of agreement. “There will be no such shocks tomorrow when our guests arrive.”

“Thank God. It is enough that you have just had a baby. We do not need the distraction and frustration of people flirting with the wrong person—”

“Or those desperate to hide how much they love someone they believe they can never be with.”

Again he chuckled, knowing she referred to the two of them, but also thinking about Bingley and Jane Ridley.

Suggesting her thoughts had gone in the same direction, Elizabeth said, “I hope Jane has good news to tell me. She was so hopeful that she was, at last, going to have a baby. I know she will be devastated if she was mistaken.”

The news of Jane’s suspicions had arrived the previous month. Before their wedding, Elizabeth had confided in him about Jane’s unhappiness, which had been her excuse for her manner towards Bingley. Darcy had assured her that her sister would always be welcomed in their homes, should she need a refuge. Fortunately, the Ridleys appeared to have settled into their marriage. While they could not be said to be as happy as the Darcys, they did well enough.

The past year had seen another marriage—that of Miss Ledbury to a gentleman from Hampshire named Gilbert. Bingley remained a bachelor and seemed content.

“It will be a peaceful, happy Yuletide, my darling,” Darcy said.

“The happiest ever. We are together, you, I, Georgiana, and now Alexander. I do love you, and our life together, so dearly.”

“As do I,” he murmured. “Hush. Rest now.”

Darcy tightened his hold on his beloved Elizabeth and soon felt her body become limp as she slipped into sleep. A few minutes later, he carried her to bed.



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Acknowledgments

I drew inspiration for the holiday celebrations depicted in *Christmas at Blackthorn Manor* from several sources, including Maria Grace's blog, Random Bits of Fascination. I am thankful that others have spent so much time and effort researching the era in which these characters I love resided so that I can better understand what their lives would have been like.

As always, my gratitude to Amy, Jan, and the whole team at Quills & Quartos.

About the Author

Lucy Marin developed a love for reading at a young age and whiled away many hours imagining how stories might continue or what would happen if there was a change in the circumstances faced by the protagonists. After reading her first Austen novel, a lifelong ardent admiration was born. Lucy was introduced to the world of Austen variations after stumbling across one at a used bookstore while on holiday in London. This led to the discovery of the online world of Jane Austen Fan Fiction and, soon after, she picked up her pen and began to transfer the stories in her head to paper.

Lucy lives in Toronto, Canada surrounded by hundreds of books and a loving family. She teaches environmental studies, loves animals and trees and exploring the world around her.



Also by Lucy Marin

The Recovery of Fitzwilliam Darcy

I have no notion who I am meant to be.

IN 1789 A TERRIBLE CRIME IS COMMITTED, plunging one family into grief as another rejoices in the gift of an unexpected son. Two decades later, a chance meeting leads to the discovery of the lost heir of Pemberley and the man who knew himself as Mr William Lucas is restored to his birthright as Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

DISCOVERING THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS PAST means leaving behind everyone and everything he has ever known and loved—including his childhood best friend and soon-to-be betrothed, Elizabeth Bennet. Tormented by questions about himself, and his place, Darcy struggles to understand and adapt to his changed identity and his new life. He must contend with a father buried in the shadows of the past and family relationships he does not understand.

The truth has come out. Some have gained by it, some have lost by it, and I am in the middle. I cannot possibly make everyone happy. No matter what I do, someone will suffer. No matter what I do, I shall suffer.

Somehow, he must find a way to do right by his new and old families, especially if he is to avoid losing Elizabeth forever.

Being Mrs Darcy

One distressing night in Ramsgate, Elizabeth Bennet impulsively offers Georgiana Darcy aid. Scandalous rumours soon surround the ladies and Fitzwilliam Darcy, forcing Elizabeth and Darcy, strangers to each other, to marry.

Darcy despises everything about his marriage to the daughter of an insignificant country gentleman with vulgar relations. Georgiana, humiliated after a near-elopement with George Wickham and full of Darcy pride, hates her new sister. Their family look upon Elizabeth with suspicion and do little to hide their sentiments.

Separated from those who love her, Elizabeth is desperate to prove herself to her new family despite their disdain. Just as she loses all hope, Darcy learns to want her good opinion. He will have to face his prejudices and uncover the depths of Georgiana's misdeeds to earn it, and Elizabeth will

have to learn to trust him if she is to ever to find happiness being Mrs Darcy.

Mr Darcy: A Man with a Plan

Fitzwilliam Darcy was a man in despair following his disastrous proposal in Kent. If only he had done this, or said that! If only he had made more of an effort?

Was too late?

Perhaps it was not, for soon after that fateful April day, Darcy unexpectedly sees Elizabeth in London. He seeks her out again, ostensibly to ensure she now thinks better of him. He quickly decides that he wants to win her affections.

It would require effort, perhaps a great effort, but Elizabeth Bennet was worth fighting for.

But in order to do so, he would need a plan.